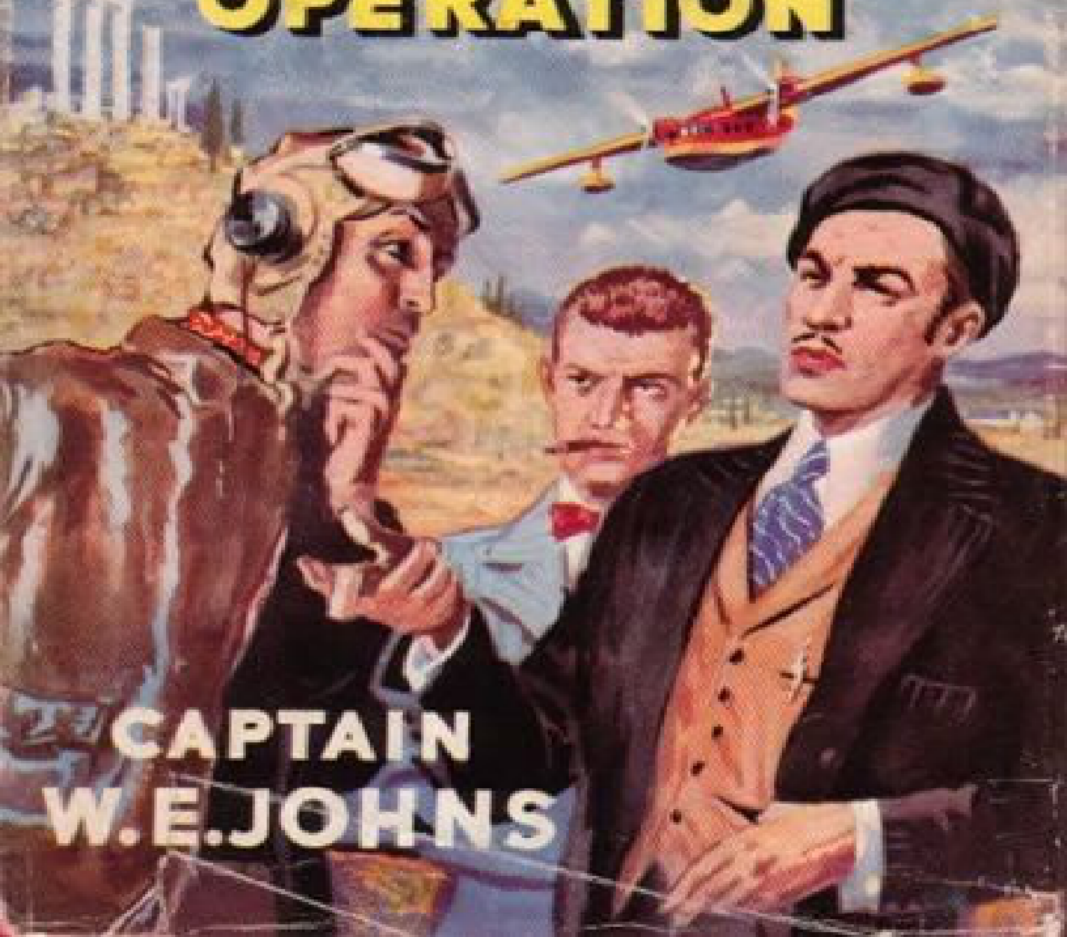


Biggles

COMBINED OPERATION



CAPTAIN
W.E. JOHNS

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CHAPTER I

BIGGLES GIVES ADVICE

BIGGLES was strolling under the colonnades of the Rue de Rivoli, in Paris, in conversation with his colleague of the International Police Commission, Marcel Brissac of France, the annual meeting of which they had just attended, when a hand touched him on the arm. Turning, he found himself looking into the eyes of a young, athletic-looking man, whose accent when he spoke, having removed a cigar from between his teeth, was unmistakably North American.

"I guess you're Bigglesworth," he said, with a disarming smile.

"You're not guessing; you know I am," returned Biggles. "You saw me at the conference this morning, and I saw you. You're Eddie Ross from the United States. Right?"

"Correct. You must have heard me say my piece."

"I did, and you didn't leave anyone in doubt as to how you felt about the chief item on the agenda."

"Ah-ha. The dope racket."

"From the way some of the delegates were looking at you they didn't think too much of what you were giving them."

"It's time somebody dropped a few bricks," stated Ross, grimly.

Biggles smiled faintly. "Well, you certainly did that. Mind one doesn't fall on your toe."

"You mean I'm liable to get myself fired? Forget it."

"You're more likely to get yourself shot."

"Two can play that game."

"You gave me the impression of having come here deliberately to let off steam."

"Sure did. Dope is pouring into the States from this side of the Atlantic."

"And you aim to stop it?"

"Sure."

Biggles glanced casually up and down the broad pavement. "By the way, meet Marcel Brissac, of the Sûreté."

"Glad to know you," said Ross, as they shook hands.

Biggles continued. "Is this your first visit to Europe?"

"Ah-ha."

"And your first big assignment?"

"Yep. How did you work it out?"

"I thought it might be from the way you carried on this morning. Don't get me wrong, but do you think it was wise to say as much as you did?"

"Why not?"

"Why tell the world what you intend to do?"

"The conference was in private session, wasn't it?"

"It was; but when fifty or more people know a thing it doesn't long remain secret. I'd wager what you said is already in the hands of the leader of the gang you hope to liquidate."

"Are you kiddin'?"

Biggles shook his head. "Unfortunately, no. Keep your voice down. You may not mind people knowing your business but I'd rather they didn't know mine."

Eddie grinned. "You seem kinda nervous."

"Rattlesnakes scare me stiff."

"We've plenty of those where I come from."

"So I believe. But they do at least give you a warning before they strike. Dope barons strike first and rattle afterwards. How old are you?"

"Twenty-four."

"Then take a tip from an older man," advised Biggles, seriously. "At your age I would probably have behaved as you did this morning, but since then I've learned there's nothing to be gained, and maybe a lot to lose, by letting the enemy know what you're doing. Let 'em find out—if they can."

Biggles walked on, Marcel and Eddie keeping pace with him. Eddie kept glancing at Biggles curiously. Catching his eye Biggles continued. "Please take what I've just said in the way it was meant. I'd be the last man to discourage resolution. I can see you're keen and I like your enthusiasm, but I fancy you haven't quite realized what you're up against."

Eddie glanced at Marcel and winked.

Marcel didn't smile. "*C'est vrai*," he said softly. "Beegles is an old fox. Remember what he tells you."

"We can handle our domestic problems but this dope is coming to us from Europe," complained Eddie.

"A lot of things we don't like come to us from America but we can't stop 'em," answered Biggles. "Have you evidence that the stuff is coming from Europe?"

"Well—er—no," admitted Eddie.

"It probably starts from the East," contended Biggles. "Asia has been in the drug business for centuries. It's big business, too; don't make any mistake about that."

The three police officers had now reached the Rue des Pyramides, at a corner of which a triple line of chairs in front of a cafe-restaurant occupied most of the pavement.

"If we're going to talk we might as well take the strain off our ankles," suggested Biggles, steering a course for some vacant chairs at the end of the line.

"Drinks are on me," said Eddie, as they sat down. "I should pay for butting in on you fellers."

"Don't let that worry you," returned Biggles. "We're all pulling in the

same boat.” When the waiter had brought their order he went on. “I’d heard the narcotics racket was flourishing in the States but I didn’t realize it was as bad as you made out at the meeting.”

“It’s worse,” growled Eddie. “The skunks are now handing out the stuff to kids. They start by giving it away—”

“Giving it away!” interposed Biggles, looking astonished.

“That’s what I said. It’s adulterated dope, fifty per cent dried milk powder, but that’s enough to spark off the habit. Having got the market going they then sell the stuff cheaply. The fool kids don’t realize that dope is habit-forming until the time comes when they must have it or go crazy. That’s when the peddler says the candies are hard to get and up goes the price.”

“Did you say candies?” queried Biggles, curiously.

“Sure.”

“I don’t quite understand.”

“Peddlers are selling the stuff as what you call sweets.”

“By thunder! I’m not surprised you’re getting worried. What’s the dope—black or white?”¹

“The stuff starts with cocaine but that’s only the first step to heroin.”

“What’s this talk about sweets?” inquired Biggles.

Ross took from a waistcoat pocket a matchbox, and from it tipped on to the table a small brown object rather like a large pill. “Take a look at that,” he invited.

“Looks harmless,” murmured Biggles.

“A chocolate?” queried Marcel.

“It is chocolate—on the outside,” resumed Ross. He picked up a knife and cutting the object in halves exposed a white centre. “There’s your cocaine,” he continued. “The man who was peddling this also had heroin,” he concluded, harshly.

“Ssh. Not so loud,” warned Biggles.

Ross looked up. “You sure seem mighty nervous.”

“I am,” admitted Biggles, evenly. “These things have that effect on me. How did you get this, by the way?”

“It was brought to us by the father of a lad of seventeen,” explained the American. “He didn’t know what it was but he got suspicious when the boy demanded more and more pocket money, and when he got it, soon afterwards seemed sorta dazed. The father thought the boy had been drinking, so one night he went through his pockets and this was what he found. It was out of mere curiosity that he brought it to us for analysis. We were able to tell him what it was.”

“What did you do?”

“We told him the next time the boy asked for money to let him have it, which he did. The boy made a bee-line for a youth club, and as we were tailing him we were able to pick up the peddler who was hawking the muck. The kid—I won’t call him a fool because he didn’t know what he was doing

—was so far gone that it took months in a clinic to get him right.”

“What about the rat who was selling him the stuff?”

“He wasn’t alone. There were others. Not only in New York. We grilled the peddler pretty hard but it got us nowhere.”

“He wouldn’t talk?”

“Not on your life. He was an Armenian by birth, and was more scared of the people he worked for than he was of us. Said if he squealed they’d get him, even in prison.”

Biggles nodded. “That probably was true. It means there’s a powerful ring behind him, one that runs its own murder gang. That’s the usual thing. These dope thugs live by creating fear of the knife or the gun.”

“The peddler got a long stretch in the penitentiary. Mebbe we’d have done better to let him loose and then tailed him.”

Biggles shook his head. “It might have worked, but it would have been a long trail to the big boss of the gang. The chances are the man you picked up didn’t even know who he was. He’d know the next contact man over him, the one that supplied him with the merchandise, but nothing more. The dope barons rarely show themselves. They stay at the base. Incidentally, picking up that peddler won’t have done anything to stop the racket. His place would be filled in five minutes. Dope is easy money, and there are always plenty of recruits to take it on. To catch the small fry is merely to cut the tips off the tentacles of a monster that can grow more at will. The one hope of putting a stop to the dirty business, for a time, anyway, is to get the iron in the heart of the beast.”

“And how would *you* go about that?” inquired Ross, cynically. “You tell me, brother, because I haven’t a clue as to where to start looking for him, and I’m in a hurry. These dope pills are popping up all over the place. Have a cigar?” Ross threw away the one he had been smoking, which had gone out, and produced another.

“No thanks.” Biggles lit a cigarette. “Tell me, Eddie—you don’t mind me calling you Eddie?”

“Wish you would.”

“Fine. Tell me, why were you selected for this job?”

“I couldn’t really say. Being an air pilot may have had something to do with it. I was on coast patrol when it was suggested I came here.”

“Did you fly your own machine over?”

“No. I came over on the regular service.”

“And what exactly were you supposed to do when you got here?”

“I came to represent the U.S.A. at the Interpol Conference and ask the Central Narcotics Bureau if they could help stop the muck coming to us from Europe. That’s mebbe why I got hot at today’s meeting.”

“They couldn’t help you?”

“No. They were sympathetic but that was as far as it went.”

“Getting hot won’t help you.” Biggles flicked the ash off his cigarette, and

went on, seriously, "If you take my advice you'll talk to nobody. And when I say nobody I mean nobody. Dope is dynamite. The man at the top will be raking in millions. I repeat, millions."

Eddie raised his eyebrows. "So you think it all starts from one man?"

"I'd bet on it. When two are in the game one gang wipes out the other, as happened in the booze rackets in your prohibition days."

"I didn't realize there was as much money in dope as you say," confessed Eddie.

Biggles smiled wanly. "To give you an idea I could tell you of one man who sold two hundred and fifty thousand pounds worth of heroin in a couple of months. His factory turned out seven tons of the poison before he was stopped. You see, he could charge any price he liked for the stuff, knowing his customers *had* to have it. A heroin addict can't give up the habit voluntarily however much he would like to. And most of them would like to."

"Who was this guy?"

"He was a Corsican who operated from Marseilles where he flattered himself by adopting the title of King of the Underworld."

"Was his factory in France?"

"It was, although the factory didn't actually belong to him. The French authorities had no idea of what was going on, of course. They soon put the lid on it when they were told by the Narcotics Intelligence Bureau."

Eddie went on. "How could contraband like dope be handled in *tons*?"

Biggles' lips curled. "You'd be surprised. There was a time when certain oriental diplomats weren't above making extra money on the side by taking dope through in the Diplomatic Bag. For the rest, I remember a case when heroin was exported in sacks of prunes. The stones were heroin. I've known it go through in the wax of candles and in the middle of blocks of concrete." Biggles' expression hardened. "If I had my way I'd string these swine up without mercy. They're worse than murderers. Did you ever see a heroin addict in the final stages?"

"I can't remember seeing one," admitted Eddie, looking hard at Biggles.

"Then you haven't, because if you had you'd never forget it," said Biggles, grimly. "He's a whimpering bag of skin and bones; a cackling, crawling corpse. You used to be able to see them in the slums of Cairo and Alexandria before the British government got cracking on it. That was when we were in control, of course. At home a recent Act of Parliament has practically abolished the use of heroin even by doctors, who sometimes used it to relieve excessive pain. That's how dangerous the stuff is thought to be, although it must be admitted that as a pain-killer it does the job. But tell me this. How far do you reckon this peddling of dope to juniors has gone in the States?"

"Plenty far," reported Eddie. "These doped candies are circulating in every big city from New York to 'Frisco."

"Then all I can say is, the sooner you get your teeth into the racket the better," advised Biggles, earnestly. "There was a time when a fifth of the

population of Egypt was down and out under the influence of narcotics. When Japan marched into China a few years ago they let the Chinese have all the dope they wanted. That proved a convenient way of thinning the population. Do you see what I'm driving at?"

"Not exactly. You're talking about Asia and Africa. I'm talking about America."

"The people of all three continents, being human beings, would react to dope in the same way. I see no reason why America should be different."

"Come straight," requested Eddie.

"Very well. Hasn't it occurred to you to wonder if there might not be more to peddling dope to kids than mere money? Suppose the habit really got hold, as it might in this age of hysterical rock 'n roll? Women as well as boys. A drug addict is no use to anyone. Deny him the stuff and you simply drive him round the bend. You say your kids are getting the stuff cheap. Why?"

"You tell me."

"Suppose someone, behind the Iron Curtain for instance, didn't like you. Can you think of a better way of rotting the constitution of your growing manpower, because I can't?"

Eddie was staring.

Biggles shrugged. "Of course, I don't say this is happening, but from what you've told me it strikes me as a possibility. Even if the chief motive was dollars the effect would be the same."

Eddie drew a deep breath. "By gosh, Bigglesworth, you've got me scared."

"Write me off as an alarmist if you like. It was just an idea, bearing in mind that no method of warfare is too low for some people."

There was a short silence. Biggles lit another cigarette. Eddie threw aside the chewed end of his cigar. "You seem to know a lot about this dirty business; tell me more," he said.

"It's a long story, too long to tell here. I know a fair bit about it because the illicit air transportation of dope comes into my job. Briefly, the rot started in the Middle East, where opium and hashish have always been a habit. Then a chemist produced heroin, which is an alkaloid poison derived from opium. Being white, smooth and tasteless, it caught on to such an extent that the Central Narcotics Intelligence Bureau was formed to stop it, or find out where it was coming from. It was coming from Europe, from France in particular. When the French government pounced, the gang moved to Switzerland. When they were stopped there they moved to Turkey where, in a couple of months, before they were rumbled, they exported two tons. Stopped there, the wholesale murderers moved into Bulgaria. It was like trying to hold a cork in water. As soon as you let it go it popped up again somewhere else. If bribery failed the purveyors bumped off anyone who got in their way. As you may or may not know, your notorious gangster Jack Diamond was bumped off because he'd switched from the booze to the dope racket. Somehow he'd got hold of around a hundred pounds weight of heroin."

"And Bulgaria is behind the Iron Curtain," murmured Eddie.

"The stuff may not be coming from there now," said Biggles. "It can be made anywhere, in any chemical works. Nationality has nothing to do with it. At the head of the syndicates there have, to my knowledge, been Armenians, Syrians, Greeks, Russians, Rumanians, and that Corsican I spoke about just now. They all established a network of peddlers, working in every country in the world."

"With all the world to choose from the problem is to know where to start looking for these devils," grated Eddie. "How would you go about it?"

"Frankly, I hadn't thought about it. You raised the subject. At the moment it seems to be your headache rather than mine, although our turn may come later. It was because of this concentration on America that it occurred to me there might be more behind it than money. Racketeers are hard enough to track down when they're private individuals; but if the stuff is now being manufactured with the connivance of a government—well, I don't know what can be done about it, and that's a fact. If it's coming from behind the Iron Curtain, for instance, it would be easier to stop the Niagara Falls, because operations would be limited to seizure after the stuff had left the country concerned."

"With thousands of miles of Atlantic and Pacific coasts how can we hope to locate and block the port of entry?" muttered Eddie.

"It wouldn't do you much good if you did grab a consignment," said Biggles. "Stop one hole and the rats will soon make another. No, the thing is to find out where the stuff starts from and tackle it at that end, although, let us not fool ourselves, that's likely to be a formidable proposition. That is assuming the stuff isn't actually being manufactured in the States."

"Do you think that's possible?" asked Eddie, sharply.

Biggles thought for a moment. "Possible but unlikely, unless someone in one of your southern states is growing the opium poppy. Heroin is derived from the opium poppy, which used to be an important crop in China, but I believe most of that has been stopped. According to my information opium is coming now from Burma and Thailand. It's quite impossible to prevent the poppy from being grown so you can wash that out. It's cropped by thousands of small farmers over a wide area and collected from them by agents. But the point is, to produce heroin on a big scale a lot of opium would be required, and as far as America is concerned to import the stuff in its crude form, in bulk, would be more difficult than smuggling the finished product. Opium, in quantity, stinks, and there's no mistaking it. That's why I'd say, Eddie, you're getting heroin direct. You have an anti-narcotic service. Haven't they been able to do anything?"

"No. That's why I'm here." In his exasperation Eddie allowed his voice to rise.

"Ssh. Take it easy," warned Biggles, frowning. "I've told you before to keep the soft pedal on. After your outburst at the conference if this racket is as

big as you say there'll be a thousand pairs of eyes watching you and as many ears listening for a chance remark. And, take it from me, not far from the eyes and ears there'll be knives and pistols. Did you tell anyone in America why you were coming here?"

"Wa'll, I guess there was no secret about it."

Biggles looked shocked. "Do you mean the *newspapers* knew?"

"Sure."

"Don't tell me they got the story about the doped chocolates."

"That couldn't be kept quiet."

Biggles drew a deep breath. "This is worse than I imagined. The racketeers will switch to a new line now they know their chocolate-drop approach has been rumbled. That makes it harder for you to get to grips. Now I'll stick my neck out by giving you another spot of advice. While you're in Europe keep out of back streets and shady corners. There are plenty. Confidence may be all right, but don't delude yourself by supposing that an American passport is a suit of armour."

Eddie looked at Biggles with a puzzled, amused expression. "Say, you sure do get worried. All this eyes and ears talk. What are we on—a film set?"

"It would be healthier for you if we were," retorted Biggles. "It's time you got wise to yourself, my lad. You've done too much bleating already."

"Aw shucks!" scoffed Eddie. "Forget it."

"Not me. And that's the last thing you should do. In fact, I doubt if you'll be allowed to forget it."

"How come?"

"You're a marked man."

"You think someone may follow me around?"

"I don't think. I know. You're being watched right now."

"Are you kiddin'?"

"This isn't a kid's game. You were being shadowed when you joined us. Don't move."

Eddie's hands closed on the arms of his chair. "Where—"

"Sit still," rasped Biggles. "How many times do you want telling?"

¹ Narcotic drugs are classified in the trade as black and white. The black (although not actually black) are opium and hashish, the opium being derived from an oriental poppy and hashish from hemp. The white drugs (the most injurious) are cocaine, morphine and heroin.

CHAPTER II

BIGGLES SHOWS HOW

EDDIE'S expression of nonchalance had changed.

"You go on talking naturally," requested Biggles. "You don't want him to see we've spotted him."

"How did you know?"

"I was expecting it."

"Why?"

"I've told you. After your outburst this morning it was inevitable. You may remember, or more likely you won't, that when you first spoke to me up the street I stopped and glanced up and down. Another man stopped too, to look in a window. That could have been coincidence. I stopped again on the way here, twice, and the same thing happened. That was why I told you to keep your voice down."

"You didn't tell me—"

"Because I wanted you to go on behaving normally. It was really in the hope of getting a good look at your friend that I sat here, knowing he'd do the same."

"And he did?"

"Of course. He's the man with a newspaper in front of his face six chairs along. He started at the far end, but has twice moved nearer, hoping, I fancy, to hear what we were nattering about."

Eddie discarded the stump of his cigar. "He's got his back to us."

"There's a mirror carrying an advertisement for beer at the far end of the bar. He can see us without turning. He's never taken his eyes off us. From the colour of his skin I'd say he's from Eastern Europe—probably a Greek."

After a short silence Eddie muttered: "Are you always on the look out for people watching you?"

Biggles smiled. "It depends on what I'm doing—and who I'm with."

"What are you going to do?" asked Eddie, after another pause.

"Me? I wasn't thinking of doing anything," returned Biggles. "It's rather a question of what you're going to do. You were the hunter. Now it looks as if you're the quarry. I'm afraid you've left a trail wide open for anyone to follow."

"I see what you mean," murmured Eddie. "I've been a fool. I'll be more careful in future."

"We all make mistakes," consoled Biggles. "I made plenty at your age." He got up.

"Where are you going?"

"When you joined the party I was on the way to my hotel. I reckoned on being at Scotland Yard in the morning—not that I have anything urgent on at

the moment. But I happen to be short of one of my staff pilots.”

“Which one?” asked Marcel.

“Algy. He’s in Canada. We had an invitation to send someone to lecture the Mounties on certain aspects of modern crime in London and Algy volunteered to go. Said it would make a change from routine work. He won’t be back for a month. No matter. I have an aircraft at the airport should an emergency arise. Tell me this, Eddie. Do you want to go on working solo or would you like some help? We’re all against this dirty racket because it can affect each one of us. Or would you rather we combined forces and put our heads together?”

“That sounds more like it to me,” returned Eddie, promptly.

“All right. What do you feel like doing?”

“What would you do if you were in my position? You know the ropes over this side. I don’t. In the States I know where I am and what I’m doing, but here I’m a stranger as well as being new to this game. But I’m willing to learn.”

Biggles nodded. “That makes sense.”

“Okay. With every capital in Europe and the Middle East to search where should I start looking for this nest of thugs? Put it this way. Where would you start, if you were on your own?”

“Just a minute, Eddie, before we go any further,” said Biggles. “There’s one angle to this set-up you appear to have overlooked. We can’t go barging about here just as we like. You’re not in the States now and I’m not in England. This is France. We’re on Marcel’s home pitch so it’s up to him to call the tune. We’ve no authority to interfere. In fact, we’ve no right to do anything on our own account. I came over to attend the Conference and after that go home. So, unless Marcel and his chief are content for us to muscle in on their domain this is where I leave things to them.”

Marcel raised his hands in a typical French gesture. “Forget that, my old cabbage. For myself, and I can speak for Captain Joudrier, my commandant, you are at liberty to do anything you like provided it is kept—how do you say? under the hats—so that if there should be an *émeute* the politicians do not ask silly questions. Why do we call ourselves international if we quibble on points of nationality? We all kick the ball for the same goals, is it not?”

“Thanks, Marcel,” acknowledged Biggles. “That’s a nice broadminded view to take, and it suits me if it suits you. Naturally, if matters here should come to a showdown I’d leave it to you to do the tidying up, although unless I’ve missed my guess the goal in this dope business won’t be found in France.”

“I call that mighty generous of Marcel,” came back Eddie. “Maybe I’ll be able to return the compliment in the States some time. We seem to be the chief sufferers from this dope disease right now. What would you say is my best play, Biggles? Where do I go from here? You tell me, before I get out of my depth.”

“Poking about haphazard isn’t likely to get you anywhere,” declared Biggles. “Let’s face it; now you’ve shown your hand you’ve even less chance of striking lucky. Your only hope is to get a line and follow it to the source of this stream of dope.”

“Where do I start looking for a line?”

“You don’t have to look. You’ve got one under your nose.”

“You mean the guy behind the newspaper?”

“Of course.” Biggles sat down again. “You might try leading him up the garden path.”

“Give him the slip?”

“Good lor’ no. That’s the last thing I’d do. Keep him in sight and turn the tables on him.”

“How? I don’t get it.”

“Let him carry on. I have to go back to my hotel because I have one of my assistants there and he’ll be wondering what I’m doing. If you like you may come with me and we’ll take this friend of yours along with us.”

“Take him?”

“Surely. He’s following you. Sooner or later he’ll have to report to someone. He thinks he’s tailing you whereas you’ll be tailing him. But first of all we’d better confirm I’m not barking up the wrong tree. Marcel, what are you going to do?”

“I have some work at the office.”

“Fine. Off you go. If he doesn’t follow you it must be Eddie our newspaper friend is following. He doesn’t know me. There’s a little job you can do when you go. Brush past that fellow, knock his paper and apologize. That’ll give you a chance to have a good look at him. You may recognize him. If you do, ring me at the Pont-Royal Hotel in about half an hour.”

“Bon,” agreed Marcel. With a smile and a wave he strode off, carelessly, as if by accident, colliding with the newspaper. He apologized profusely and walked on.

The man behind the paper remained in his seat.

“It must be you he’s after,” Biggles told Eddie. “Let’s get along to my hotel. We might as well walk. It’s less than half a mile—just through the Tuileries Gardens and over the bridge.”

“And then what?” asked Eddie, as they got up.

“One thing at a time,” replied Biggles. “We’ll decide on the next move when we see how things go.”

Eddie paid the bill and they moved off at a brisk pace.

Three minutes later, crossing the well-known gardens, Biggles stopped for a moment apparently to admire a flower-bed. A sidelong glance told him what he really wanted to know. “Here he comes,” he said quietly.

“I can see you’re an old hand at this game,” observed Eddie.

“It isn’t the first time I’ve played it,” confessed Biggles, lightly. “Whatever you do don’t look round. Once he realizes we’ve spotted him the game’s

finished.”

They crossed the bridge, and walking on down the Rue du Bac entered the Pont-Royal hotel by the main entrance.

As they walked through the swing doors into the lounge Ginger rose from the chair in which he had been waiting and strolled to meet them.

“You must have had a long session,” he greeted them. “I thought you were never coming.”

“Any news from the office?” inquired Biggles.

“No.”

“Good. Let’s go up to my room. I may have a job for you. By the way, this is Eddie Ross, from the Air Interpol Section, U.S.A. He’s over for the Conference—among other things. We may be involved in a combined operation. Eddie, meet Ginger Hebblethwaite, one of my staff pilots.”

Ginger and Eddie shook hands.

“Glad to know you,” said Eddie.

The lift took them up to the second floor where Biggles had one of the front rooms. He went straight to the window that overlooked the street—the Rue du Bac.

“There he is, Eddie,” he said. “Outside the *bar-tabac*.”

“He’s going in.”

“Probably gone in to telephone someone, to say you’re here. He’ll watch the hotel, now.”

“What’s all this about?” asked Ginger.

“Eddie’s being shadowed. He took a strong line this morning on the dope racket so it didn’t surprise me to see someone taking an interest in him. Ah! There he is, coming out now. The chap in the black beret, flashy tie and natty brown and white shoes. I’d say they were bought in the States. It wouldn’t astonish me, Eddie, if, as a result of the publicity you got in America, he followed you over from there. That’s it. He’s taken a seat. Going to make himself comfortable. From there he can see everyone who leaves the hotel.”

“I’ve got him,” said Ginger, gazing through the window.

“I want you to go down and keep an eye on him,” ordered Biggles. “If he leaves, tail him. Check where he goes and who he speaks to. I don’t think he knows we’ve spotted him, and as he can never have seen you there should be no trouble about it.”

“Okay.” Ginger was on his way to the door when the phone rang.

“Just a minute,” said Biggles quickly, reaching for the receiver. “That will probably be Marcel. Hello! Yes, Biggles here.... Fine.... Good work. Thanks a lot. I’ll call you back if we need help.... Yes, he’s in the street below, watching the hotel entrance. Me? I may stay on here for a bit to see how things go. *Au revoir*.”

Biggles hung up and turned to the others. “You heard that. Marcel didn’t know our friend below but in going through the photo records he’s identified him as a knife-slinging apache named Georges Macula, said to be a

Rumanian, who hangs out in the Latin Quarter and spends a lot of time with another sewer rat known as Del Griikko, who runs a night club near the Place Pigalle in the Montmartre district. Both have criminal records.”

“That’s a good start,” said Eddie.

Biggles looked at Ginger. “Well, there you are. That’s the gen. Get on with it. I shall be here if you want me, but if I should have to go out I’ll leave a message with the hall porter. That girl who operates the hotel telephone switchboard speaks good English, anyway.”

“Suppose someone contacts Macula? Who do I follow, Macula or the contact man?”

“Follow the contact. It’s unlikely that Macula will leave his pitch while Eddie’s here in the hotel so at a pinch *we* could watch him.”

“Okay.” Ginger went off.

Presently, Biggles and Eddie, still looking out of the window, saw Ginger cross the road and enter the bar, to emerge tearing the wrapper off a packet of cigarettes.

“That was only to have a close look at him,” observed Biggles. “He can be relied on not to lose him. Well, that’s it. There’s nothing more we can do for the moment beyond keeping an eye on things from this window.” He pulled up a chair.

“What does this guy Macula hope to gain by watching me?” asked Eddie, presently.

“There could be two reasons for that,” answered Biggles. “First, the gang may simply want to know where you are and what you intend to do next. Or they may be waiting for an opportunity to slide an inch or two of steel between your ribs.”

Eddie frowned. “Do you seriously think they’d go as far as that?”

“Without a shadow of doubt. I’ve told you these people have their own murder agents. Maybe at the moment you’re not considered dangerous, but the moment you are, watch your step. A little while ago I mentioned Jack Diamond. He was a gangster and a gunman, and one would have thought he could take care of himself. Oh no. From the day he touched dope he’d had it. He bolted to Europe and did a circular tour trying to throw them off his trail. Not a hope. They riddled him with bullets in broad daylight. I don’t want to harp on it, but you can take it from me that of all the hot jobs a man can undertake, to try to break up a big dope gang is the hottest. A bomb-disposal squad has a cushy job in comparison.”

“What about you?”

“As soon as it’s realized I’ve joined forces with you, and that won’t take long if we’re seen together, I’m on the same spot as you. So what? Someone has to do the job, and as to me dope is like a red rag to a bull I have a more than ordinary interest, as you might say. Hello! What’s going on below?”

A taxi had pulled up outside the bar. From it stepped a man. Macula rose to meet him.

"The new man isn't staying," murmured Biggles.

"How do you know?"

"He hasn't paid off the taxi so the driver has obviously been told to wait. Ah, there's Ginger."

While the two men were talking Ginger walked to an island in the middle of the street, where, at a rank, some taxis were waiting for fares from the hotel. After a word with the driver he got into the one at the head of the rank.

Biggles snatched up the telephone. "Mademoiselle, this is urgent," he told the hotel operator tersely. "Send a page to take the number of the taxi at the head of the station by the island. Quickly. If he gets it send him up to me. *Merci*." He replaced the receiver, and glancing at his watch made a note of the time on the phone pad. By the time he had done this the taxi outside the bar was moving off, to be followed, just as a uniformed hotel page ran out, by the one Ginger had taken. Macula returned to his chair. The page darted back to the hotel.

"Why did you do that?" Eddie asked Biggles.

"Just a precaution. If Ginger should run into trouble we would at least know where the taxi dropped him. Marcel could soon get that information for us—as long as we have the number of the cab."

"I wouldn't have thought of a detail like that," confessed Eddie.

Biggles lit a cigarette. "You'll find it's often the little things that turn out to be the most important," he observed, tritely.

There came a knock on the door. At Biggles' invitation it was opened to admit the page, who presented a slip of paper on a tray. "The number monsieur wanted," he said.

"*Merci bien, mon petit*," acknowledged Biggles, taking the paper. "*Voilà*." He dropped some coins on the tray.

The boy smiled. "*Merci, monsieur*." He went out.

Biggles noted the number on the paper, folded it up and put it in his note-case.

"I must say you don't overlook chances," said Eddie.

"If you miss chances at this game, my lad, you may soon be missing yourself," returned Biggles, lightly. "Keep an eye on Macula while I organize a pot of tea. Five o'clock tea is one of the English habits I take abroad with me."

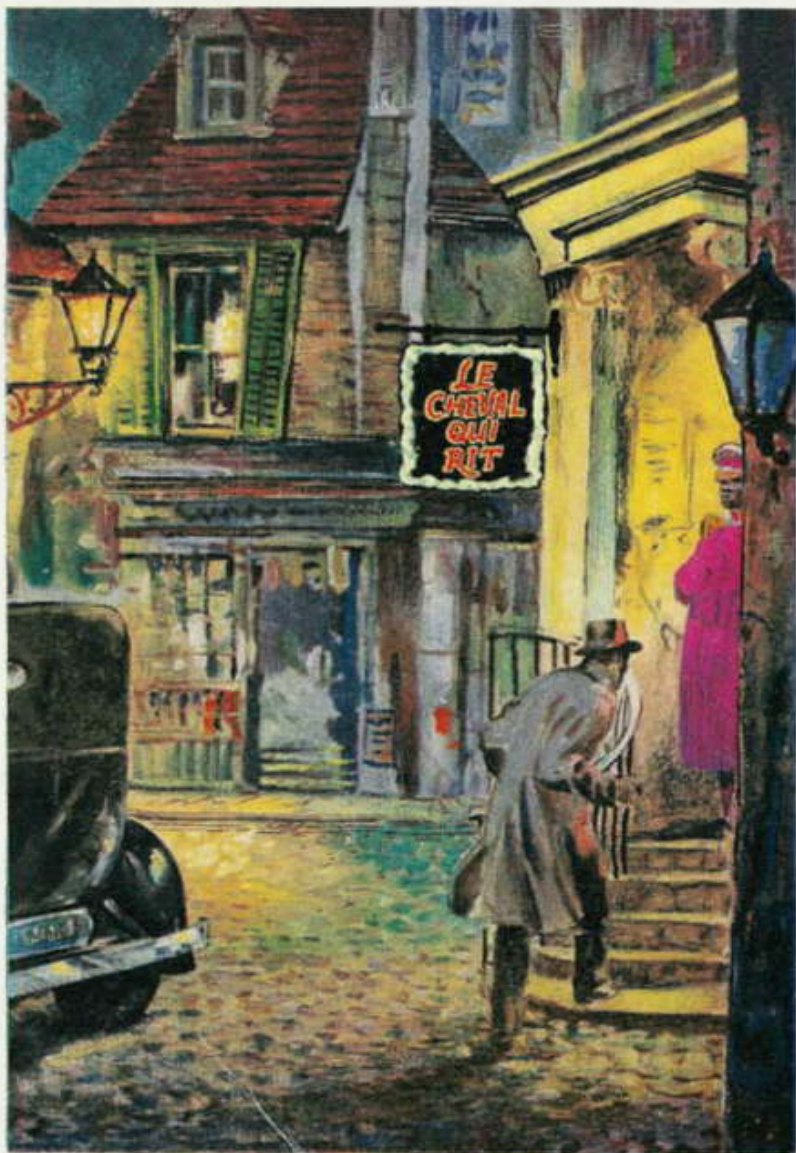
CHAPTER III

GINGER GOES ALONE

IT was with confidence that Ginger set off on what he imagined would be a simple routine job. He had no reason to think otherwise, for he had done this sort of work before, sometimes in more difficult conditions. On this occasion he at least had the advantage of being unknown to the man he was shadowing.

He did not know Paris well enough to be able to follow the route they were taking, and more than once, in queues at traffic lights, he was afraid he might lose his man. On one occasion he found himself quite close to him, but as he was behind him he did not see much of his face. He watched for street names, but saw few. The last one he saw was the Boulevard de Clichy. Soon after this the leading cab turned into a narrow street, badly lighted except for a neon sign which, translated literally, read the Horse that Laughs.

Seeing his quarry stop below the sign he called sharply to his driver to do the same. The order obeyed, he saw the passenger in the leading car get out and enter the establishment with the comical name. He sat still for a few minutes, watching, and then, having paid his driver, strolled on to the door through which his man had disappeared. Observing that the place was a dance hall, or something of that sort, he went in, acknowledging the nod of a uniformed negro janitor. Before him was a fair-sized hall with a bar in one corner. Red plush benches, with tables at intervals, lined the walls, so making his way to a vacant length of bench he sat down prepared to watch for anything worth noting.



Ginger saw him enter the establishment with the comical name

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There were not many people present, as was to be expected at that hour in a public house that was evidently something between a dance hall and a brasserie. He could not see the man he had followed; nor did he seriously hope to do so, for he had caught no more than a glimpse of him and was by no

means sure that he would recognize him again even if he saw him. In the circumstances, he pondered, there was really very little point in staying there, and for a moment or two he contemplated returning forthwith to Biggles, to report. However, as he was in no particular hurry he changed his mind, deciding that he might as well sit still for a few minutes if for no other reason than to form an opinion of the sort of customers who frequented the place.

A doddering old waiter, napkin on arm, ambled up to him for his order. Ginger shook his head, but then deciding that he could hardly occupy a seat without spending money called for a small black coffee.

No sooner had the waiter departed than a man moved from another seat and sat next to him, greeting him with an ingratiating smile.

"I say, old man," he questioned huskily, "you're English, aren't you?"

"I am. Why?"

"I suppose you wouldn't care to lend me a thousand francs," was the surprising request. At least, Ginger found it surprising.

"No. You're quite right, I wouldn't," returned Ginger. "Why should I?"

"Because I'm English, too."

"What has that to do with it?"

"I've lost my wallet and now find myself stuck here without a sou. I can't even pay my bill."

"That's your bad luck," retorted Ginger. "What did you have that would cost a thousand francs? Champagne?" He had a suspicion the man had been drinking, and had not the slightest intention of paying for luxuries he could not himself afford.

"Five hundred, then."

"You're wasting your time," said Ginger, shortly. "You won't get a bean from me, so push off."

The man had a good look at Ginger's face, and finding there no sympathy sighed deeply and moved back to his original seat. He looked so pathetic that Ginger, relenting, a little ashamed that he had been so abrupt, was tempted to call him back; but feeling sure that if he gave the man money it would promptly be spent on liquor he hardened his heart and let him go. Perhaps the fact that he saw the waiter coming with his coffee had something to do with it.

Again he considered leaving, and probably would have done so had he not ordered the coffee, for at this juncture an orchestra filed in and the crash of percussion instruments did nothing to make the place more attractive. Even so, he couldn't very well leave without paying for what he had ordered so he had more or less to sit still.

The waiter put the coffee on his table, and would have walked away, as is customary in France, had not Ginger called him back to insist on paying there and then. This would leave him free to go as soon as he had finished the coffee. Actually, it was so hot that he couldn't drink it, and he had no alternative than to wait for it to cool. As one so often does in such circumstances he began taking it in small sips.

The cup was still half full when a feeling began to creep over him that the heat and general atmosphere of the place was getting him down. The din made by the band seemed to become distant, and the scene hazy, as if the lights had been turned down. With his handkerchief he mopped the beads of perspiration that had formed on his forehead. Deciding quickly that he could stand no more he rose to go, to discover with a shock that his legs were unable to support him. He swayed on his feet, and staggering when he again tried to move had to clutch at a table to prevent himself from falling. Some people sitting near, laughed.

Thinking he had been taken ill he flopped back in his seat. Hoping, and feeling certain, the feeling of faintness would soon pass, he rested his elbows on the table with his head between his hands. This only seemed to make matters worse. To his increasing alarm the room began to spin and he feared he was going to faint.

A hand fell on his shoulder. Looking up with an effort he saw the whirling face of the negro doorkeeper, huge and distorted, looking down at him. Another man was with him. Ginger tried desperately to ask for water but his lips were dry and trembling and he could only mouth incoherently. His last recollection was of being lifted by strong hands.

When next he opened his eyes he saw, as through a mist, a man, a tall white man he had never seen before, standing over him with a glass in his hand. As things began to clear he discovered he was lying on a couch, no longer in the dance hall but in strange surroundings. The uniformed door keeper was not there, but another dark-skinned man was present. Feeling his strength returning, and feeling also somewhat ashamed of the exhibition he had made of himself, Ginger tried to rise, but the white man gently but firmly pushed him back.

The man said: "Feeling better?"

"Yes, thanks," answered Ginger, trying to smile. "Sorry to have given you so much trouble. I must have fainted. Can't imagine why."

"Can't you?"

"No. I've never done such a thing before. I'm all right now. Would you be so kind as to call me a taxi?"

From which it will be realized that he was still under the impression he had been overcome by the heat and noise in the dance hall and had passed out, an experience entirely new to him. He wondered vaguely how long he had been unconscious. He had of course no idea. A glance at his watch told him. It also shook him. He was thinking it must have been a bad faint to put him 'out' for so long when the unknown man spoke again.

"There is no hurry," he said. "Here, take another drink of this. It will pull you round completely." He spoke in smooth, perfect English, with just a trace of foreign accent that told Ginger he was not an Englishman.

Ginger took the proffered glass gratefully and emptied it at a gulp to discover the man had told the truth. The liquid was pungent but acted like

magic. The mist rolled away. "Thanks," he said again. "That is most kind of you." He looked around. "By the way, where am I?"

"Never mind where you are," was the reply, with such a marked change of tone that Ginger started.

"What do you mean by that?" he inquired, wonderingly.

"I'm going to ask you some questions, and if you're wise you'll answer them." The threat in the words was now unmistakable.

The truth struck Ginger like a blow as for the first time it dawned on him that his faint had not been due to natural causes. "So that was it." He had been doped... given some knock-out drops. It must have been the coffee. Shock tied his tongue.

Any doubts he may have had about the reason were dispelled when the man went on. "Now listen carefully, my not-so-smart young friend. This evening, in a taxi, you followed another taxi to a dance hall called the Laughing Horse. Don't lie by denying it."

Ginger had no intention of denying it. It would obviously have been futile, anyway. So he had been spotted, he thought bitterly. He couldn't imagine how or where he had slipped up. The reply he made was merely to gain time, time to adjust himself to the situation. "What gave you that idea? Why should I follow another taxi?"

The man smiled coldly. "The one you chose to follow happened to be fitted with a mirror to enable the passenger to see behind him without turning his head. He knew within a minute that he was being followed and he told me so."

"Told you?" Ginger was still playing for time.

"By radio."

"I didn't know Paris taxis were equipped with two-way radio."

"Mine are. But you weren't to know that. I thought I'd better have a look at you so I ordered you to be brought here. Now, having I hope satisfied your natural curiosity, what have you to say for yourself?"

"What do you expect me to say?"

"Anything, as long as it is the truth. If it isn't I shall soon know."

Ginger understood now why the man in the cab had not paid the driver. He had noticed that, and should have been warned; or at least should have realized that the taxi was a private one. It was a slip for which he could have kicked himself.

"Why did you follow that cab?" went on the man, remorselessly.

Ginger did not answer. He could think of nothing convincing to say. To deny the charge would obviously be useless.

"Who ordered you to follow that cab?"

"A friend of mine was interested to know why he was being followed."

"What's his name?"

Ginger was silent.

"Was it that Yankee cop who sent you on this jaunt?"

“No,” replied Ginger, truthfully.

“Then who are you working for—Max?”

“Max who?”

“Don’t give me that. You know who I’m talking about. Max Bronnitz. Are you on his payroll?”

“I have nothing more to say,” retorted Ginger.

“That’s what you think. I may have a means of making you change your mind. I have no time to waste. Now, are you going to come clean?”

“No.” Ginger had realized by now that his interrogator had no suspicion that he was actually a police officer.

Being English, and in Paris, that was understandable. It was assumed, he thought, that he was working for an opposition gang, and decided it might be a good thing to play up that impression. “I’m no squealer,” he said.

“Have it your own way.” The speaker made a sign to the coloured man, who had stood by, watching. “See what you can do, Louis,” he ordered.

Louis wasted no time. Without warning he slapped Ginger across the face with a force that knocked him flat on the couch. “So you no talk, eh,” he leered, and took a razor from his pocket.

At this moment there was a peremptory double knock on the door.

“Wait a minute, Louis,” muttered the white man, irritably, and strode to the door.

It was the uniformed janitor. “Stranger just come in, boss. Ah don’t like the look of him. Englishman, I think. Thought I’d just let you know.”

“All right. Get back to the door.”

‘Yes, boss.’

The boss turned back to where his assistant was holding Ginger flat on the couch. “We’ll deal with him presently,” he said, indicating Ginger.

“Meanwhile, give him something to keep him quiet.”

CHAPTER IV

TO THE LAUGHING HORSE

BIGGLES and Eddie sat talking long after they had finished their tea. Once Biggles broke off to put a call through to London to let Bertie know that his movements were uncertain and that he might not be back the following day as he had anticipated. He gave no details to account for the probable delay.

By the time he had done this darkness had fallen and the million lights of the French capital were glowing and winking in the gloom. From the street below the window, the Rue du Bac, came a steady roar of rush-hour traffic as workers in the city made for home. This comes rather later than in London. What with the darkness and the countless lights, moving and stationary, it was no longer possible to see Macula, and the question arose, was he still keeping watch? Biggles said he would go and find out, so leaving his new-found colleague he left the room. In two minutes he was back.

Eddie looked surprised, with good reason. "Gosh! That was quick work," he remarked.

Biggles grinned. "I didn't have to go far. In fact, I didn't have to leave the lift. He's sitting in the hall."

"You mean—he's in the hall of the hotel?"

"Yes. Luckily I spotted him so all I had to do was press the button and come back up."

"He's got a nerve!"

"No doubt he finds it more comfortable than outside. After all, the hall is more or less public. There are always people sitting there waiting for friends to come down, or come in."

"Then it won't be possible for me to leave without him seeing me go."

"That, we may suppose, is what he believes; but he's wrong. He's forgotten one thing—that is, if he's aware of its existence."

"What's that?"

"The service lift, the one used for baggage. It's the other side of the front doors. When you're ready to go get the floor waiter to take you down that way. Macula's sitting where he can watch the stairs and the passenger lift, which, as you may have noticed, are side by side. He won't see you go."

"I shall soon have to be going, if only to get something to eat."

"You can dine here if you like. The hotel has its own restaurant. By the way, you haven't told me where you're staying."

"I'm at the Bristol."

"I see." Biggles looked at his watch. "I don't know what to do next. What on earth can Ginger be doing all this time? Something must have happened to keep him. He can't still be in that taxi. If he isn't soon back I shall start worrying."

“He may still be tailing someone.”

“Nothing else would have kept him so long. The question is, where has he landed?”

“Are you going out to look for him?”

“I shall have to if he doesn’t soon turn up. But it’s no use wandering about on the off-chance of meeting him. If he’s tailing a dope peddler he’s just as likely to be in one of the plush joints along the Champs Elysees as a low dive in the Montmartre district.” Biggles thought for a moment. “It’s half-past eight. I think I’ll have a word with Marcel.” He reached for the telephone.

“Listen, Marcel,” he went on, when the operator had put him through.

“Yes, we’re still being watched. Macula has moved into the hall to make sure Eddie doesn’t give him the slip. But I’m getting a bit concerned about Ginger, who left here some time ago to tail a man who we saw make contact with Macula. The fellow was in a taxi and Ginger followed in another. I want to know where it dropped him, because he can’t still be in it. I managed to get the number of Ginger’s cab. This is it.” Biggles gave the number and went on, “He engaged it at four twenty-five precisely from the head of the rank in the middle of the street opposite this hotel. If you can get in touch with the driver he should be able to remember where he was paid off. Yes. I’ll wait here for you to ring me back. Eddie will probably stay with me. Good. Many thanks.” Biggles hung up. “This is where international co-operation comes in useful,” he told Eddie.

“It looks as if your idea of taking the number of Ginger’s cab was a wise move.”

“It’s our only chance now of finding out where he went.”

“Will Marcel be able to locate the driver of the taxi?”

“Quite easily, I’d say. They have these things well organized in Paris.”

“You think Ginger may have run into trouble?”

“Something must have gone wrong or he’d have been back by now.

Whether one knows it or not one is usually on thin ice from the moment one tries to interfere with a dope ring,” said Biggles seriously. “To such an organization the removal of anyone who gets in the way, or knows too much, is all a part of the business.”

It was forty minutes before Marcel came back on the phone.

“No,” reported Biggles. “He isn’t back yet. You’ve got it? Good work.”

After that he listened for some time, making notes on the pad beside the telephone and occasionally interpolating a remark. “Yes, I know the district fairly well.... That’s interesting, but perhaps not surprising... yes, I shall go round right away as long as you don’t mind me barging in on your home ground. Should anything serious have happened I’ll call you right away, naturally. Yes, I’d be glad if you would look in. That would be better still, but I don’t want you to feel I’m taking too much on my own... all right. Fair enough. If I find Ginger or should he come back here I’ll let you know. Okay. Goodbye.” Biggles hung up and turned to Eddie. “As you may have gathered

from that Marcel has spoken to the driver of Ginger's cab."

"That was smart work."

"Most taxi-owning companies are in touch with their drivers and the police are in touch with the companies. Marcel would know from his records who the taxi belonged to so he had only to call the firm and ask them to send the driver of that particular cab to police head-quarters. He remembered picking up Ginger, and what's more important, where he dropped him."

"Where was it?"

"At a night club called the Laughing Horse in the Rue Manton, which is a little street between the Place Pigalle and Montmartre. The Laughing Horse happens, not surprisingly, to be the joint run by Macula's pal, Del Grikko. The driver says he was told to follow another taxi and that's where it went, and where it dropped its fare. Ginger sat in his cab for about ten minutes, watching. Then he paid off his driver who saw no more of him."

"Did the cab go straight there?"

"Apparently."

"Then Ginger must have been there for hours."

"Not necessarily. He may have gone off on another trail. But he may have gone inside. I'm going along to see if he's still there. Marcel hopes to join me there when he's finished what he's doing. In case Ginger should come in while I'm away I'll leave a message with the hall porter telling him to wait here for us. I'll do that on the phone so that I shan't have to show myself to Macula. I shall leave by the service lift."

"You talk as if you were going alone."

"That was the idea. Do you want to come?"

"Of course."

"That's all right with me, but you realize you may be recognized as the man who had a lot to say about drugs this morning?"

"So what? I shan't get any place by shutting myself in a hotel bedroom."

"True enough."

"You think this club might be a dope den?"

"I don't know. Could be."

"What about you? You might be recognized as a cop, if it comes to that."

"It's possible, but unlikely. It was you, not me, who started the ball rolling this morning. I thought plenty but I said nothing."

"Okay—Okay. Don't rub it in. That was a mistake I shan't repeat."

"Macula would recognize me, no doubt, as one of the party you were with this morning on the Rue de Rivoli, but he's below, watching for you, so let's hope he stays there." Biggles thought for a moment. "I think it might be as well if we didn't go into this Laughing Horse dive together. You follow me in. I shall soon know if you're under observation. That goes for me, too, of course. There's no reason why we shouldn't sit near each other as long as we behave as strangers. We might get into casual conversation later, as one does in these places."

“You talk as if you were going to stay there.”

“I might, or I might not. That will probably depend on Ginger. I’m going there primarily to look for him. If I see him I shall join him, to find out what he knows. Take your cue from me. If I leave, follow me out.”

“What sort of place is this Laughing Horse?”

“I don’t know, but I can imagine. The sort of place where fool tourists pay high prices for inferior stuff and kid themselves they’re seeing Paris by night. It’s unlikely there will be many people there yet. This is early for Paris, where things don’t really get warmed up till around midnight. But let’s stop guessing and get there.” Biggles picked up his hat and rang for the floor waiter.

When the man came Biggles told him: “There’s a friend of mine in the hall but I’d rather not go out with him tonight. Take us down by the service lift so that he won’t see us go out.”

“*Oui, monsieur.*”

The ruse worked without a hitch and a few minutes later Biggles and Eddie were getting into a taxi that had just dropped its fare near the hotel. A quick peep through the glass of the revolving doors had revealed Macula still watching the lift and the stairs with cat-like patience.

“It looks to me as if they’re not going to let you out of their sight,” said Biggles. He told the driver where they wanted to go and off they went.

The Rue Manton turned out to be a narrow, badly lighted, insalubrious-looking little street of old houses and shops, although, as Biggles was aware, in Paris such outward appearances can be deceptive. The taxi paid, he walked on ahead of Eddie to where a hanging sign depicting the grotesque head of a laughing horse indicated the objective. A big negro in a resplendent uniform was on door duty. He swept off his hat and opened the door for Biggles to enter, to be greeted by bright lights and the blare of swing music being hammered out by a five-man coloured orchestra. A hard-faced female among them was crooning to the music. One or two couples were jiving in an open space left for the purpose, but for the most part the customers were at the seats and tables, placed round the walls, with drinks and snacks in front of them.

Biggles’ eyes swept round the assembly seeking Ginger, but failing to see him he made his way to a sparsely occupied bench well inside the room. From there he made another reconnaissance to confirm that Ginger was not there. He couldn’t see him. Eddie came in and found a seat close at hand. A waiter came up.

“Have you a restaurant here?” Biggles asked him.

“*Non, monsieur.* We have the snack only.”

“This is the only room?”

“*Oui, monsieur.*”

Biggles ordered a drink and a ham sandwich, and while he was waiting, lit a cigarette, uncertain as to what he should do next. He decided to wait a few minutes and watch events. Nobody appeared to be taking any notice of Eddie, which suggested he had not been recognized.

Twenty minutes or so passed without incident. A steady trickle of people were coming into the club. Occasionally one would move aside a velvet curtain near the band and disappear for some minutes behind it. Once Biggles caught sight of a door, marked private, behind the curtain.

"Ginger must have gone home," said Eddie, without looking at Biggles. He had to speak loudly to make himself heard above the band.

"I think so," answered Biggles. "Presently I'll find a phone and ask the hall porter if he's come in."

It so happened however that events took a turn that prevented him from doing this. A man who had gone behind the curtain came back within a minute and flopped down on a wall seat, close to Biggles, chin in hand in an attitude of dejection. In view of what he was doing there Biggles had naturally taken an interest in the visitors to the private room behind the curtain.

Catching Biggles' eyes the man's face twisted in what presumably was intended to be a smile; but it was a pathetic effort. Biggles, who was in no mood for casual conversation with strangers, did not respond to the obvious overture. He looked away. The next thing he knew the man had sidled along the seat and was sitting next to him.

"I say, old man, you're English, aren't you?" said the man, in a cultured but wheedling voice.

Biggles considered the speaker with an uncompromising expression on his face. "What of it?" he asked, coldly.

The man forced a vacuous grin. Of early middle age, Biggles knew from his voice that he was British; but he was not a good specimen. His clothes, well cut and of good quality material, had seen better days, and his linen was not as clean as it might have been. His face was thin to the point of being haggard. His hair, which badly needed cutting, was thin and streaked with grey. Biggles decided he was one of those pieces of human debris which, for reasons known only to themselves, eke out a precarious existence, sponging on tourists, in the sordid atmosphere of Parisian night-life. Wherefore he merely said: "Go away."

"Lend us a thousand francs, old boy; just a measly quid's worth, that's all," pleaded the man.

Biggles did not answer.

"I'm up against it, really I am," went on the man, almost cringing. "Come on. Be a sport. I haven't had a bite of food all day." He looked on the point of bursting into tears.

For the first time Biggles studied the face close to his own. He looked him up and down, from his staring eyes with dilated pupils to hands that shook as if with ague.

"If I gave you money you wouldn't spend it on food," alleged Biggles, frostily.

"Would it matter to you what I spent it on?"

"The question doesn't arise. I've a better use for my money than to—"

“Go on. Say it. I’m past taking offence at anything. You wouldn’t give me a franc to save my life, would you,” said the man, bitterly.

“You’re ending your life fast enough without any help from me.”

“How right you are. The sooner I finish the job the better for me and everyone else.”

“What’s your name?”

“Burton. Noel Burton.”

“What got you into this mess, booze or dope?”

“What does it matter? I’m sick. I’m due for a shot in the arm. If I don’t get it I shall go and jump in the river. You can see the state I’m in.”

“So it’s heroin.”

Burton glanced around furtively. “Yes,” he whispered.

“Where did you start this lunacy?”

“Right here. Now I can’t get away from it.”

“You still get it here?”

“When I’ve money to pay for it. Now I’m broke.”

“Do other people come here for the same reason?”

“Of course.”

“Are there any here now?”

“No. Most of them go when they’ve got what they came for. That’s the rule.”

“Why did you stay?”

“Because having no money the swine who runs this place has packed up on me. I hoped you’d be charitably disposed.” Burton spoke viciously.

“You don’t seem to like him.”

“I hate his guts.”

“What’s his name?”

“I don’t know, but they call him Del Grikkio.”

“Is this the only place in Paris where you can get the stuff?”

“As far as I know the Laughing Horse has the monopoly. Nothing else would bring me to the stinking hole. That devil Del Grikkio used to give me a shot in the arm for five hundred francs, but now he knows he’s got me where he wants me he’s raised the price to a thousand.”

“Why don’t you go to the police?”

“And get myself knifed?” Burton spoke with biting sarcasm.

“And now you’re right out of money?”

“If I had any I wouldn’t be sitting here cadging.” Burton spoke with bitter emphasis.

“How does this fellow Del Grikkio get the stuff you want?”

Burton looked at Biggles through eyes narrowed with suspicion. “Why do you want to know?”

Biggles shrugged. “Call it curiosity. Del Grikkio must be a fool to antagonize you. Isn’t he afraid you might give him away to the police?”

“He’s no fool. He knows I wouldn’t dare talk.”

"Why not?"

"I'm not exactly in love with life but I could think of better ways of dying than those he hands out to squealers."

Biggles took out his note-case and fingered it suggestively. "Would a couple of thousand francs overcome your fears if I promised not to give you away?"

Burton's eyes glistened at the sight of the notes. "What do you want to know?" he breathed, after a quick, furtive glance around. "Are you a cop?"

"What would an English policeman be doing in Paris?"

"Yes. Of course. That's right. Silly question. What do you want to know?"

"How does heroin get to a place like this?"

"A man brings it once a month. He came today. That's why I'm here."

"Is he still here?"

"Yes. That's him, the flashy half-caste sitting over there swilling champagne with the woman in a red sweater. The overdressed little beast with the oily skin and drooping black moustache. Just look at that ridiculous imitation diamond ring on his finger! And that tie—like a rainbow. About time he had a haircut."

Biggles nodded assent. "He certainly is a nasty-looking piece of work. What's his name?"

"Alfondez."

"Nationality?"

"They say he's an Egyptian. Probably is. He speaks English like you or me, as he would if what he says is true."

"So you've spoken to him?"

"Yes. I once tried to get him to sell some of the stuff direct to me. He laughed in my face. Told me he'd once been a doctor in London but was struck off for some funny business. That's why he took up dope. That's what he told me. He's a man of education, anyhow. You can tell that by the way he speaks."

"How does he get the stuff?"

"I don't know. Now can I have the money, please?"

"In a moment. Where does he come from when he comes here?"

"I've no idea. But I'm saying no more. I've said so much already I'm scared stiff." Burton put out his hand for the notes.

"One last question. How long have you been here?"

"Since noon."

"Did you see an Englishman come in—a little before five o'clock? He was wearing grey flannel bags and a greenish sports jacket. Has reddish hair."

"Yes. I saw him. Spotting he was British I tried to touch him for a thousand but he brushed me off."

"Did you see him go?"

"No. That is, the last I saw of him he was being carried out."

Biggles' eyes opened wide. "Carried?"

“Yes. He was drunk.”

Biggles stared. “Did you say *drunk*?”

“Tight as a lord. Couldn’t stand. In fact, he passed out.”

“Who carried him out?”

“Louis and Rastus. Rastus is the big fellow at the door.”

“Where did they take him?”

“Through to the back, to sleep it off I suppose. They couldn’t very well dump him in the street. Anyway, the last I saw of him he was going feet first behind the curtain. He a friend of yours?”

“Yes,” answered Biggles, tight lipped, and thinking fast. As Ginger never touched spirits he knew he couldn’t have been drunk. He couldn’t believe that he had so suddenly been taken ill, so what had happened was fairly obvious. He had been spotted by the man he was shadowing. Or something of the sort.

“What’s behind that door behind the curtain?”

“The office.”

“Is that where people go to get their dope?”

“Yes, but for God’s sake don’t say I said so or my body will be in the river before morning.”

“If I gave you these two notes what would you do?”

“Go and get a dose. I’m past salvation but I could get temporary relief, which is all I care about.”

“Is that door open or kept locked?”

“Locked.”

“How do you get in?”

“I knock. There’s a special knock for regular customers.”

“I imagine you know the knock?”

“Of course. Louis opens the door, and if he knows you lets you in. He’s Del Grikkio’s bodyguard. But why are you so interested?”

“I’m looking for the Englishman we’ve spoken about. He’s a friend of mine.” Biggles handed over the two notes. “I’ll give you five more of these to get me behind that door,” he suggested.

“Nothing doing.” Burton was emphatic. He rose, making it clear that now he had the money he had no further interest in the conversation.

Biggles walked quickly to Eddie. “Ginger’s in trouble,” he said, tersely. “He’s in the office. I’m going through to get him. There’s a job for you. Tail that half-caste-looking type sitting against the wall with the girl in red. He’s a dope runner. Follow him wherever he goes. Don’t lose him. Be careful. Contact me later.”

“Sure I can’t help you to—”

“No. Do as I say. Can’t stop now. See you later.”

“Okay.”

Biggles strode on to overtake Burton, already at the curtain. He reached it in time to hear the special knock. The door was opened. There followed a brief argument, Burton protesting that he now had money. This settled the

argument. He was admitted. Seeing the door closing Biggles took a swift pace forward and jammed it with his foot. This move he followed up by putting a shoulder to the door and giving it a shove. This served its purpose. The man holding it, caught unprepared for anything of the sort, reeled back. He recovered instantly, but by that time Biggles was in the room. For a second his eyes rested on Ginger, who was lying on a couch; they then switched to a man, presumably the one Burton had referred to as Louis, who was advancing towards him menacingly.



Biggles burst into the room

“What do you think you’re going to do?” inquired Biggles, icily. “Keep your hands off me.”

There must have been something in Biggles’ voice, or perhaps his expression, that caused Louis to hesitate and glance across the room, presumably for instructions, to another man, a tall white man, who was

standing by a table littered with papers, bottles, glasses, ash-trays and the like. Not counting Burton, who with jaw sagging in comical dismay was staring at the scene, he was, Biggles noted, the only other person present.

CHAPTER V

DEL GRIKKO CALLS THE TUNE

BIGGLES stood still, looking at the man for whose orders Louis was obviously waiting. Was this Del Grikkio? He thought so.

He was tall, powerfully built, clean shaven, of early middle age. His nationality might have been almost anything, although his skin was of that curious smooth texture and indefinable tint peculiar to countries bordering on the eastern Mediterranean. His hair, which began low on his forehead, was jet black and gleamed with an oil dressing. A prominent nose and firm mouth suggested a strong character, a man who was not to be trifled with. When younger he might have been handsome, but pouches under his eyes and jowls beginning to sag, apparently the result of too much good living and too little exercise, now destroyed any illusion of good looks.

It was he who broke the silence that had fallen after Biggles' sharp words to Louis. He did not address Biggles. Turning a baleful eye on Burton he demanded in a voice so silky that it held a threat: "Did you bring this man in here?"

"No. No—no," stammered the wretched Burton, almost in a panic. "I didn't bring him in! I swear I didn't. He must have followed me."

"You miserable liar," sneered the tall man. "I told you to keep out, didn't I?"

"Yes. Yes, that's right. But I came back because I could pay for—"

"Shut up!"

Burton nearly collapsed. Clearly, he was in terror of the man.

"He's telling the truth," put in Biggles, crossing to Ginger, who looked sick, or rather, dazed.

"Who are you and what do you want?" asked the man behind the table, without moving.

"I called to collect my young friend here," answered Biggles, evenly. "What have you done to him?"

"Why do you suppose I should do anything to him?"

"As he wouldn't have got into this condition by himself somebody must have done something to him."

"He had too much to drink. We don't like that sort of thing here. It gives the place a bad name."

Biggles nodded. "I can understand that," he said, dryly.

"What do you think you are going to do?"

"Take him along with me. I can take care of him," answered Biggles, observing that Ginger was trying to get into a sitting position.

"I don't know who you are so I may have something to say about that," was the reply, in a hard, calculating voice.

“Very well. Say it, but make haste, because I’m in a hurry and my friend looks as if some fresh air wouldn’t do him any harm.” Biggles spoke casually, almost nonchalantly, hoping to bluff his way, with Ginger, out of a situation the nature of which, he was well aware, was more dangerous than the conversation suggested. And in this he might have succeeded had it not been for an interruption as unexpected as it was unwelcome.

“Do you mind telling me who you are and why you should suppose your friend was here?” inquired the man who by this time Biggles was sure could only be the proprietor of the establishment—Del Grippo.

This was a difficult question to answer, but as it happened the necessity did not arise, for at this juncture there came a sharp double knock on the door, a signal that spoke eloquently of urgency.

The door had been locked by Louis, who now looked at his master for instructions.

The knock was repeated.

“Better see who it is, Louis,” said Del Grippo.

Louis turned the key in the lock and opened the door cautiously, whereupon into the room strode the last man Biggles expected to see. It was Macula. He stopped dead, staring, when he saw Biggles standing there. He pointed an accusing finger. “What’s he doing here?”

The atmosphere in the room tightened perceptibly. Del Grippo stiffened. His hand moved slowly towards a drawer in the table. “Do you know him?” he asked, in a tone of voice very different from the one he had hitherto employed.

“I don’t know who he is, but I saw him this morning with that American cop, Ross,” declared Macula, harshly.

“Oh, so that’s it,” murmured Del Grippo. “I should have guessed it.” He turned a smiling face to Biggles. But his eyes were not smiling. “So now we know where we are,” he said, softly. He glanced at Macula. “Where’s Ross now?”

“He’s still in the Hôtel Pont-Royal. Or I thought he was. I left Lucien watching.” A thought seemed to strike Macula. “I don’t know how this one got out without me seeing him go.”

“Let’s ask him,” said Del Grippo. “I understand Ross was staying at the Bristol. What was he doing at the Pont-Royal?”

“He went there with this one.” Macula jabbed a thumb at Biggles. “I watched them go there together. I didn’t see either of them come out.”

Del Grippo looked at Biggles. “How did you get out?”

Biggles shrugged. “As this gentleman made it so obvious that he was following me, and as I dislike being followed, I used the service lift. Quite simple.”

“You fool!” Del Grippo flung the words at Macula, who quailed. He turned back to Biggles. “Where’s Ross now?”

“I wouldn’t know; and if I did I wouldn’t tell you.” Actually, this was

nearer the truth than it might appear, for as Macula must have walked through the club room, obviously without seeing Eddie, he concluded he was no longer there.

Del Grippo turned on Burton. "An hour ago you were flat broke. I know you were. Where did you get your money from?"

"I gave it to him," interposed Biggles.

"For what?"

"As one Englishman to another. He told me he had had nothing to eat all day."

Del Grippo's lips parted in a cynical smile. He turned cold eyes to Burton. "You talk too much. I've told you before about trying to borrow money from clients. Did you tell this man you saw his friend brought in here?"

"Oh leave him alone," protested Biggles. "He meant no harm. I asked him if he'd seen a ginger-haired Englishman come in and he told me he'd seen him brought in here out of the way because he was drunk and incapable. What of it? He was right, wasn't he? I didn't really need his help. I should have come to the office to make enquiries, anyway. I don't know what all the fuss is about. And now, if you don't mind, I'll get along, taking my friend with me."

"Not so fast," said Del Grippo smoothly. He looked at Burton. "Get out."

"But—"

"I said *get out*."

"But I can pay—"

Louis seized the wretched drug addict by the scruff of the neck and bundled him out of the room, slamming and locking the door behind him, so that, not counting Biggles and Ginger, there were three men in the room—Del Grippo, Louis and Macula.

Quite calmly Del Grippo took an automatic from a drawer of his table and held it so that the muzzle pointed at Biggles. Then he hesitated. "Louis," he said, "slip out and tell the band to make as much noise as possible and not stop till they get the order from me. That should drown any other noise." He spoke casually, as if there was nothing unusual about such a command.

Louis walked again to the door. As he reached it there was a sharp knock on the other side. It was an ordinary knock, not the special signal.

After a momentary silence Del Grippo called: "Who is it?"

"The police, open up," was the answer, given authoritatively.

Del Grippo's mouth set in a hard line. "I'm busy. What do you want?" he called.

"Open the door and I'll tell you, unless you want me to break it down."

Del Grippo shrugged resignedly and put the gun back in the drawer. "All right, Louis, open the door," he said, softly.

Louis obeyed. He opened the door and Marcel walked in.

To Ginger's amazement and disgust Del Grippo became a different man. It was hard to believe that the smile he put on was not one of genuine pleasure.

“Ah! *Le capitaine Brissac*,” he cried. “*Bonsoir, monsieur le capitaine*. You haven’t honoured us with a visit for a long time. We thought you must have forgotten us. What can I do for you?”

“Nothing,” answered Marcel.

“Close the door, Louis,” said Del Griikko. “We can’t hear ourselves speak for the noise the band is making.”

“Don’t bother, I’m not staying,” returned Marcel.

“But surely you’ll take a little glass of something!”

“No thanks. I only looked in to collect these friends of mine. I was told they were here. They don’t know Paris very well and it’s so easy for strangers to find themselves in the wrong places. Don’t you agree, *monsieur*?”

“Quite right,” confirmed Del Griikko. “I don’t know what things are coming to in Paris. One hears such stories of violence—”

“That one can hardly believe them,” concluded Marcel, smiling sadly.

Del Griikko indicated Ginger. “If this young man is a friend of yours you should warn him to keep sober. Hearing of the state he was in I had him brought in here for his own safety. He might have had his pocket picked.”

“I imagined something of the sort must have happened,” replied Marcel coolly. “But we needn’t trespass on your hospitality any longer.” He looked at Biggles and Ginger. “Are you ready?”

None of the men in the room moved as, in dead silence except for the discordant din made by the band, Marcel and the others walked out. As they crossed the hall to the outside door Biggles looked for Eddie, but could not see him anywhere. Observing that Alfondez had gone, too, for his female companion was now sitting alone, he concluded that Eddie had followed him.

“Did Eddie come here with you?” Marcel asked Biggles, in a thin tight voice.

“Yes, but I don’t see him here now. I asked him to follow someone and I think he must have done that.”

“Better make sure. It would be fatal to leave him here alone. Macula’s here, and he, if not the others, would know what he was.”

“I think he must have left before Macula came in,” said Biggles, who nevertheless made a last careful scrutiny of the clientele of the Laughing Horse before turning again to the door. The only person he recognized was Burton, slumped in a chair in an attitude of utter dejection. “Had Macula spotted Eddie as he came through the hall he would have told Del Griikko as soon as he entered the office,” he remarked.

“Phew! Am I glad to be out of that?” muttered Ginger, as they walked quickly down the dark street to the well-lighted Place Pigalle with its teeming pedestrians.

“You were taking a chance, Marcel, barging in alone like that,” went on Biggles.

“Del Griikko didn’t know I was alone,” Marcel pointed out. “I might have been making a raid with a dozen men outside for all he knew. As you saw, he

knows me. We have crossed swords before. I wasn't happy about you going to that dangerous dive. It has a bad reputation, that place. Not seeing you in the hall I guessed where you would be."

"Thanks," said Biggles. "Things were beginning to look ugly. Del Griko had a gun in his hand when you knocked. He intended to use it, too, unless he was bluffing."

Marcel shook his head. "Men like that one don't bluff. Had you no gun?"

"No. I came to Paris to attend a conference, not start a private war on your underworld. I'll carry one in future, though, while I'm here."

"It was not like you to walk into the cage without first seeing if the wolf was there. Why do you do this, *hein*?"

"What else could I do? I had to get to Ginger. I knew he was inside. I couldn't walk out and leave him there. Let's face it. In sending him on what seemed a simple errand I made the blunder of underestimating the enemy. Where are we going now?"

"To a nice little *bistro* I know just along the boulevard where we can talk. I want to know what happened."

"And I shall be interested to know how they spotted Ginger and got hold of him."

Five minutes later, in a quiet corner of Marcel's *bistro* with food and wine in front of them Ginger was narrating his story of the cab with mirrors and the drugged coffee. "It was as easy as that," he concluded, bitterly.

"You see what sort of people they are," murmured Marcel, seriously. "Nothing is left to chance."

When Biggles had told of how he had learned from Burton, a drug addict, that Ginger had been carried inside he went on: "I hope Eddie's all right. I feel responsible for him, although when I told him to tail that Egyptian dope carrier I had of course no idea of what was going to happen."

"It's not much use looking for Eddie tonight, I'm afraid. He might be anywhere."

"We may find him at the hotel, or a message from him, when we get back. I told him to contact me there as soon as he was able to do so."

"The evening wasn't entirely wasted," resumed Ginger. "I learnt one or two things."

"Such as?" inquired Biggles.

"Del Griko runs his own taxis, which are fitted with mirrors and two-way radio."

"That's something to bear in mind. Anything else?"

"Yes. Until Macula barged in Del Griko had no suspicion that I might in some way be connected with the police."

"Then why did he pull you in?"

"He thought I was working for an opposition gang— which means there must be one."

"Speaking of Macula, I wonder why he left his post at the Pont-Royal. We

know he was relieved by another man, named Lucien, but I feel he may have learned from the hotel staff that Eddie had left. It was him they were watching. But you were saying something about an opposition gang, Ginger. What gave you that impression?"

"Del Griikko asked me point blank if I was working for a man named Max. I'm pretty sure he believed that. I didn't have to pretend ignorance. I told him straight I didn't know what he was talking about, whereupon he mentioned what I took to be the man's full name—let me see, what was it—Bronnitz. That's it, Max Bronnitz."

Marcel looked up quickly. "Did he mention an address?"

"No."

"Hm. I wonder..."

"Does the name mean something to you?" asked Biggles.

"I know of a man named Max Bronnitz," answered Marcel, slowly. "But he runs an expensive restaurant off the Champs Elysées. There has never, as far as I know, been a breath of suspicion about him or his restaurant; but at this game one never knows. There could of course be another man of the same name in Paris."

"If there are two gangs at work there'll be war going on between them, that's certain," declared Biggles.

"That would save us some trouble."

"Not necessarily. If one gang wiped out the other it would leave the most powerful one on top for us to deal with." Biggles looked at his watch. "I ought to be getting back to the hotel to see if there's any news of Eddie. He should be able to take care of himself, so while I'm not exactly worried on his account I shall feel easier in my mind when I know he's all right. When I asked him to tail that Gippy type, Alfondez, I didn't realize we were so deeply involved as we are. But before I go let's just run over the position as we see it now."

"*Bon*. Proceed, old fox."

"First, we know definitely that Del Griikko is running a dope shop, although whether that's a sideline, or whether the Laughing Horse is merely a cover for a bigger business in dope, isn't clear. I'm inclined to think the latter. He's a dangerous type, anyway. Did you notice his eyes? As cold as those of a fish. He isn't the head of the ring, of course. He's merely a purveyor, a man who retails the stuff to the public, probably one of scores. The top men are seldom seen. He certainly isn't the man who's flooding America with doped chocolate drops."

"Then why his interest in Eddie?" queried Marcel.

"I'd say that was because Eddie came to France. His purpose in coming here was known to the dope king because the United States press had made a story of it. Del Griikko would automatically be tipped off to keep an eye on him, which leads me to think Del Griikko might be the leading agent in Paris, perhaps in France."

“It would be a waste of time to raid his place after what’s happened,” said Marcel. “Any evidence of dope will by now have disappeared.”

“That’s quite certain,” agreed Biggles. “What we really want to know now is where he gets the stuff. According to that poor addict, Burton, who spoke to me, it’s brought to the Laughing Horse by Alfondez. The question is, where does *he* get it. If Eddie is on his trail, as I hope he is, we may soon know, which would take us one step nearer the head of the gang. If it turns out there are two gangs in operation, that will complicate matters. If Del Griko’s lot are the least powerful it means we’re on a false trail, although it could lead us to the other one.” Again Biggles glanced at his watch, and got up. “Now I must be getting along. We’ll get together again tomorrow when we’ve heard from Eddie.”

“I left my car round the corner so I can run you home,” offered Marcel. Which presently he did, dropping them at the main entrance after a final word about the arrangements for the next day.

In the hall Biggles went to the reception desk to ask if there were any messages for him.

“*Non, monsieur*,” he was told, after the message rack had been investigated. “Some time ago a gentleman who had been waiting in the hall a long time asked if you were in—”

“Do you mean he asked for me by name?”

“I told him your name, *monsieur*. He described you exactly.”

“I see.”

“I rang your room, but getting no reply told him I thought you must have gone out.”

“Thank you,” acknowledged Biggles, walking on to the lift.

“That must have been either Macula, or the man who took over, Lucien,” he told Ginger as they went up. “It could be that was why Macula shot back in a hurry, to report to his boss that he knew my name and that Eddie had given him the slip. Not that it’s important now. Are you feeling all right?”

“Pretty fair,” replied Ginger. “I shall be okay after a night’s sleep. I can still taste that dope they dished out to me—either that or the antidote they used to bring me round. It’s given me a mouth like a piece of sandpaper.”

“Knock-out drops would naturally be part of their equipment,” said Biggles, as he closed the door.

CHAPTER VI

FRESH PLANS

BIGGLES and Ginger were having breakfast, continental style, in their room at eight the following morning, Biggles getting worried at having heard nothing from Eddie, when the phone rang. He reached eagerly for the instrument. "This may be him," he said tersely.

"Yes, Biggles here," he called. "Go ahead." He then listened for some time without speaking, leaving Ginger to curb his impatience to know the news although he was able to deduce from an occasional chance interpolation by Biggles that it was Eddie at the other end of the line.

At last Biggles spoke at some length. "You know, Eddie, the position is a bit difficult. As I told you before this is France, and we can't do as we like. It's up to Marcel. In any case I shall have to let my chief know what's in the wind. Now the conference is over he'll be expecting me back. Not that we've anything on as far as I know. I'll tell you what. You stay where you are. I'll have a word with Marcel and send Ginger down to join you with the latest news. Maybe Marcel will come down with him; perhaps fly him down in his own machine, in which case I could use mine to slip over to London. Where to meet? Yes, you'll need a rendezvous. I suggest the Hotel Europe. That's in the main street so it's central. Okay. Let's leave it like that. Stand fast till Ginger joins you. The enemy has got us all marked so be careful. Okay. Be seeing you. Goodbye for now." Biggles replaced the receiver.

"That was Eddie," he told Ginger, unnecessarily. "It's a relief to know he's all right."

"He seemed to have a lot to say."

"He had quite a night."

"Where was he speaking from?"

"Marseilles."

"Marseilles! Good lor'! Then he must have spent most of the night in the train!"

"He did. What happened was this. When Alfondez left the Laughing Horse he tailed him as I suggested. Alfondez walked to the Place Pigalle, picked up a taxi and went to a restaurant off the Champs Elysées called the Grand Vin."

"I wonder could that be Bronnitz's place. Marcel said it was off—"

"Could be, although that would imply Alfondez is playing the dangerous game of double spy—working for both dope groups. I'll ask Marcel about it. Well, Alfondez had a meal and left the place somewhat hurriedly. In fact, Eddie says he lost sight of him in the restaurant for a few minutes and thought he had lost him. Anyway, by standing near the door he spotted him going out. With Eddie still on his trail Alfondez then took a taxi to the Gare de Lyon where he bought a ticket on the Rapide for Marseilles. Eddie did the same.

They reached Marseilles about five o'clock this morning, poor Eddie having had a miserable night watching at the intermediate stations to make sure his man didn't jump off. Speaking from memory there are only about five stops, but Eddie, afraid that the Marseilles ticket might have been a blind, took no chances, so he didn't get any sleep. He had no luggage with him, of course, but he had money so he's been able to fix himself up with some small kit."

"Does that mean he's lost Alfondez?"

"Not exactly. At Marseilles, still on the trail, he shadowed his man to the docks, where Alfondez boarded a craft flying the Panamanian flag named the *Saphos*, which, he says, is a black-painted job of about two hundred tons. It has a yellow band round the funnel. He says it looks like an old steam yacht that has been converted for commercial work. Alfondez hadn't come ashore when the ship cast off, so that, as far as Eddie was concerned, was the end of the trail. Using his head he took a taxi to the top of the hill that overlooks the harbour and watched the *Saphos* out of sight. She took a course south-east."

"He'd no idea where it was bound for?"

"Not a clue. Returning to the port he made a few discreet enquiries but all he could learn was that the *Saphos* docked about once a month, dropped a cargo of dried fruit—figs, raisins, currants and so on—and shipped a load of salt fish. The skipper is a Greek named Stavroulos. That's all. Then he decided it was time he rang me up."

"He did pretty well, considering."

"Very well indeed."

"And he's still at Marseilles?"

"Yes. I've told him to wait there. His idea, since he can't follow the *Saphos*, is to be there when she comes back, but we may be able to do better than that. After all, if Alfondez did come back with another consignment of dope he would in all probability take it straight to the Laughing Horse so we should only be back where we started from. The first question that arises is, is the *Saphos* a professional contraband runner or is Alfondez working on his own without the knowledge of the skipper? But we'll discuss that later."

"What are you going to do?"

"First, ring Marcel and tell him what we know. Then I shall slip home to ask the Air Commodore what he thinks about all this. He won't be happy about us operating on foreign territory but it's for him to decide whether we carry on or pack up. I shall point out, of course, that the show-down may not be on French soil. At the moment the *Saphos* is on the high seas, which are public property. Our next step must be to find out where she's bound for, which should tell us where Alfondez picks up the dope. That's the root of the business."

"Dried fruits sound like the far eastern end of the Mediterranean; Greece or the Levant."

"The *Saphos* is now on such a course. She might be going anywhere, but as her present course, if she continues on it, will take her round the leg of Italy

we can rule out Genoa and the North African ports.”

Ginger stared. “Are you thinking of shadowing the *Saphos*?”

“Why not? A ship at sea is easier to follow than a man in a crowd—particularly if one has an aircraft.”

“But the Proctor isn’t equipped for long distance marine work.”

“I wasn’t thinking of the Proctor. If the chief’s willing, and if it’s okay with Marcel, I’d collect Bertie and bring him along in the Otter. You go to Marseilles and meet Eddie at the Hotel Europe. I’ll phone you there as soon as the Air Commodore decides what we’re to do. But let’s hear what Marcel has to say about it. He should be at his office by now.” Biggles reached for the phone.

Having been put through to Marcel he said: “We’ve heard from Eddie but I don’t think it would be wise to talk on the phone. Will you come round to us or shall we come to you? Fine.” Biggles hung up. “He’s coming round right away,” he told Ginger.

Ten minutes later Marcel walked in. “*Bonjour, mes amis*, what news?” he inquired, breezily.

“Before I give you our gen tell me this,” requested Biggles. “You said last night this man Bronnitz had a place near the Champs Elysées. Is it by any chance called the Grand Vin?”

“It was,” answered Marcel, with a curious expression.

“What do you mean—*was*. Isn’t he there now?”

“He’s dead. He was found last night, in his private room behind the restaurant. Someone had stuck a knife in his heart.”

Biggles whistled softly. “What time was this?”

“It must have been about half-past eight.”

“Then I think I can tell you who did the job.”

“Who?”

“Alfondez. The man who delivers the dope to Del Grikkio. You’ll remember he was at the Laughing Horse last night. From there he went to the Grand Vin. I thought he was playing a double game, but I was wrong. It’s clear now that he’s in the Del Grikkio outfit. Bronnitz must have been on the other side. That’s why he was handed his chips.”

“Where’s Alfondez now—do you know?”

“Yes, but he’s beyond your reach. At the moment he’s well out in the Mediterranean in a craft named the *Saphos*.”

“How do you know this?”

“From Eddie.”

“Where is he?”

“In Marseilles, where he arrived this morning on the heels of Alfondez. But let me tell you his story, then you’ll know as much as we do.” Having narrated Eddie’s adventures Biggles concluded: “He’s now waiting in Marseilles till we’ve decided what we’re going to do.”

“And what are you going to do?”

“That depends on you. What do you want us to do? Carry on or leave things in your hands?”

“*Mais non*. What do you want to do?”

“Follow the *Saphos*—or rather, Alfondez. It’s our only chance of getting the information we want, which is where the dope starts from.”

“If the *Saphos* is at sea it’s as much your affair as mine, old cabbage. You take over the controls and set the course. Where do we go?”

“All right, if that’s how you feel. If my chief in London will give his permission I shall follow the *Saphos* to its next landfall, or if necessary to its final destination. We hold one trump card. Del Griko doesn’t know Alfondez was shadowed to the *Saphos* so he’ll think we’ve lost the trail. I shall go home right away. If the Air Commodore is willing I shall come back with that old amphibian of ours, the Otter, which you may remember.”

Marcel nodded. “I remember very well. Has she an endurance range for what may be a long trip?”

“If necessary I could get fuel and oil at Malta or Cyprus. Meanwhile, Ginger is going to Marseilles to make contact with Eddie. Will you go with him or wait here?”

“I’ll go with him. I could fly him down in my machine.”

“That would suit me fine, because it would leave me the Proctor to take home.”

“Where is it—Le Bourget?”

“Yes.”

“*Bon*. My machine’s there. I can run you both along in my car. I’ll fly Ginger to Marseilles while you go to London. We wait for you at Marignane, on the marine side of the airport.”

“Capital. If the Air Commodore says no I’ll phone you there and let you know. Otherwise, expect me late this evening. Can you make arrangements for me to refuel?”

“But of course. We are of the International Police, *n’est-ce pas*?”

“There’s one last point I feel I ought to make,” said Biggles. “If you’d prefer to put a feather in your cap by waiting for a month for the *Saphos* to come back to Marseilles and then catching the murderer, Alfondez, red-handed with a load of dope—”

Marcel made a gesture of dissent. “It might not be Alfondez next time. It might be another man, one we don’t know. Besides, for fear of his life Alfondez wouldn’t tell us where he was getting the stuff so the big problem would remain.”

“I hoped you’d see it like that,” returned Biggles. “I’m all for going for the lot—or nothing. Now let’s get cracking. The *Saphos* should not have got so far that we can’t find her, but we’ve no time to waste. Ginger, you might take my kit with you to Marseilles. There’s no point in my taking it home and then bringing it back. I’ll go on and pay the bill. See you down in the hall.”

CHAPTER VII

BERTIE HAS A BRAINWAVE

AT seven o'clock the same evening the old but still airworthy Otter flying-boat amphibian of the Air Police Flight landed on the placid surface of the lagoon which is the base for marine aircraft at Marignane, the big airport of Marseilles. Cutting an ever-widening ripple from its bows it taxied on to a slipway where Marcel, Eddie and Ginger stood waiting, occasionally waving to show where they were.

The Otter came in, twin engines idling. Bertie threw a line ashore. Ginger caught it, pulled the aircraft alongside and made fast. The engines died. Biggles stepped out, followed by Bertie.

"So you made it," said Ginger, smiling.

Biggles made the necessary introductions before he replied: "Yes. The chief was a bit sticky at first but at the end he left it to my discretion. Any news at this end?"

"Nothing fresh."

"Have you had anything to eat lately?" inquired Marcel, always practical.

Biggles grinned. "Nothing to speak of. I've been on the move most of the day."

"Then I suggest you go to the buffet and stoke up while I top up the Otter's tanks."

"Good idea."

"Are you thinking of moving off this evening?"

"Definitely. We mustn't let the *Saphos* get too far away."

"What are you going to do if you find her?"

"Probably sit down on the water out of sight. I had a look at the sea as I came in. It looks as calm as a mill-pond. Obviously we can't keep flying round the *Saphos*. They'd twig what we were doing. By the way, has Eddie been brought up to date with our news? I gave Bertie the gen as we flew down."

Ginger answered. "Eddie knows as much as we do, and what we propose. He's tickled to death about it. He thought he'd come to the end of the trail."

"That, I fancy, is still some way ahead," said Biggles, leading the way to the buffet, leaving Marcel and Ginger to service the aircraft. They had eaten while they were waiting. So for that matter had Eddie, but Biggles wanted a word with him.

"You're sure you want to go with us on this trip?" he questioned.

"Goodness only knows where we shall end up. It might be anywhere."

"Sure I want to come," declared Eddie. "I'd hate to be stuck here. And Paris—well, I seem to have made that the right place to get my throat cut."

"Don't say I didn't warn you."

"I'm not saying it. We were all afraid your chief wouldn't let you come."

"He was a bit nervous about the trip, as he always is over anything unorthodox off British territory. But that's understandable. He's the man who gets the rap if anything goes wrong," said Biggles, as they entered the buffet. "Now let's eat. We can talk later. I'm anxious to push on and if possible locate the *Saphos* before sundown. We should be able to do that. Unless she has more powerful engines than your description of her suggests she shouldn't have made more than a hundred miles."

Little more was said for the next half-hour, at the end of which time Biggles paid the bill and returned to the Otter with the remark: "On jaunts of this sort it's sound policy to eat while you have the chance. From now on we may for some time be living out of cans."

"We're all set," announced Ginger, when they rejoined him and Marcel.

"Then let's get airborne," returned Biggles. "Marcel, you probably know the coast better than I do so you might sit with me in the 'office'. Ginger, take over the radio. Bertie can do a spot of navigation. You'll find the appropriate charts in the locker. Let's go."

Five minutes later the Otter was in the air, heading south-east over a calm blue sea with the sun dropping towards the misty coastline of Spain behind them. To starboard lay the open sea. On the port side ran the rocky indented shore of Southern France. Except for a few small craft close in there were few ships in sight. A transatlantic liner, probably Italian, was steaming west, and a tramp was ploughing a lonely furrow towards North Africa. These were of no interest to Biggles who, having taken the Otter to three thousand was beginning to scan the horizon ahead. He did not expect to see the *Saphos* yet, but with visibility near perfect, although the fight was beginning to fade, he was taking no chances of missing her.

Twenty minutes later a faint smudge of smoke caused him to alter course a trifle, but the ship turned out to be a thousand ton tramp heading south. After one or two similar false trails he turned back to his original course to overtake another, smaller craft. "That looks as if it might be her," he told Marcel. "It's on the right course." He throttled back a little to lose height.

"It answers to Eddie's description," said Marcel, presently.

"Ask him to come forward and have a look at her."

Eddie came forward. "It looks like her. Can you go any lower?"

"I can, but I don't want to. If the *Saphos* is a regular contraband runner the people aboard her will be suspicious of any sort of craft coming close. However, I can afford to drop off a little more height if I alter course to give the impression that we're going past her at an angle."

A few minutes later Eddie said: "Yes, that's her."

"Good," replied Biggles. "Ask Bertie to plot her course. If she's heading straight for her next port of call, and I don't see why she shouldn't be, we may get an idea of where it is."

"Okay."

Biggles held straight on, overtaking the *Saphos* at an angle, until Eddie returned.

"All Bertie can say," he reported, "is that she's on a direct course for the Strait of Bonifacio, between Corsica and Sardinia. After that, if she doesn't turn more easterly to Rome or Naples, she'll be on her way to the Straits of Messina, round the toe of Italy."

"Probably to the Levant. Burton thought Alfondez was Egyptian but he might have been born anywhere in the Levant. Thanks, Eddie. That's all for the moment. This looks like being a long trip."

Marcel looked at Biggles with askance. "What do we do —*hein*? We can't stay in the air all night."

"We shall have to sit down on the water, if necessary on the open sea, and wait for tomorrow. There's nothing else for it."

"But why sit on the open sea? Have you forgotten that Corsica is French? Why not sit down at Ajaccio and continue the hunt in the morning after a comfortable night's sleep? It would also be another opportunity to top up our tanks."

"If you can arrange that, *mon camarade*, it would be the perfect answer to our question. The *Saphos*, supposing she goes through the Strait, may alter course, but she shouldn't get so far that we wouldn't be able to find her. We shall have to risk it, anyway. We'd lose sight of the *Saphos* presently in any case, when the sun goes."

"*Alors*, on to Ajaccio, where I have friends."

While this conversation had been going on Biggles had held the machine straight, so that the *Saphos* was now far behind them. A new compass course was obtained from Bertie and only a slight turn was necessary to put the Otter's bows towards the objective.

Ajaccio, the capital of Corsica, was reached just as the sun was dropping into the western sea, and permission to land having been received the Otter was put down and made fast to a mooring to which they were directed. Formalities having been complied with, simplified of course by the presence of Marcel, Biggles said: "There's no need for everyone to stay aboard. I shall stay, but there'd be more room in the cabin if some of you slept ashore; so anyone who feels inclined to sleep between sheets is at liberty to do so provided he's here by the crack of dawn, at which time I intend to press on. The *Saphos* is making good time, which means she has plenty of power in her engine room, so if she doesn't heave to for the night, and I can't think of any reason why she should, by morning we shall have a bit of leeway to make up. We don't want to lose her."

Bertie stepped into the conversation. "Listen here, old boy. I've got an idea, an absolute corker. At least, I think so."

"Go ahead and spill it," invited Biggles, suspiciously. "I know what some of your brainwaves are like."

"There you are, you see," came back Bertie in a pained voice. "Cramping

my style even before you know what it is.”

“Go ahead. I’m listening.”

“Looking down at the ship on that gorgeous calm sea it struck me that it might save us a lot of aviating if one of us was aboard her.”

“Who, for instance?”

“Me, naturally, as the inspiration was mine. You see, laddie, if I was on the bally ship, it wouldn’t matter if you lost her. I should know where we were, and all that sort of thing. Get all the gen at close range, and what have you.”

Biggles’ expression did not change. “That’s a great scheme,” he acknowledged, seriously. “But there’s one snag that sticks out like a sore thumb. How are you going to get on board?”

“Perfectly simple, old boy. I’ve got it all worked out. It’s a slice of cake. When we get ahead of the *Saphos*, dead on her course, all you have to do is go down and push me overboard.”

Eddie’s voice, pitched high, nearly broke with incredulity. “Are you kiddin’?”

Bertie looked pained.

Biggles remained serious. He raised a hand. “Let him finish. So we push you overboard. Then what?”

“I can swim, can’t I? When the ship comes along she spots me, picks me up, well, there I am—if you see what I mean.”

“And if she doesn’t pick you up, there you are, up the creek without a paddle.”

“Not at all,” protested Bertie. “In that case all you have to do is come back and collect me. You see, I’ve got it all taped, cut and dried and wrapped up, as you might say.”

Biggles smiled at the expression on Eddie’s face. “He gets the quaintest notions,” he said, softly. He looked back at Bertie. “Tell me this. What excuse would you give your rescuers for taking a dip a hundred miles or more from the nearest land?”

“I wish you wouldn’t be so difficult, old boy. I’d tell the truth. There’s nothing like the truth to save complications. I’d say I fell out of a plane. That would account for me being in my togs.”

Biggles shook his head. “No,” he decided.

“Why not?”

“It’s too dangerous.”

“I could wear a life jacket, just in case the scheme came unstuck. I’m assuming, of course, that the bally sea remains calm.”

“You know as well as I do that in half an hour, from flat calm, this particular stretch of water can be throwing itself about in convulsions. It’s notorious for it. It only needs a change of wind.”

“There isn’t any wind.”

“There may be.”

“I’ll tell you something else,” persisted Bertie. “If the blighters on that ship

see you waffling up and down they'll guess why. Don't you see, I'd provide an excuse for you to be about. They'd think you were looking for me. In fact, I'd tell them so. I'd say that's the plane I fell out of. Naturally, you would be looking for me if I fell out. At least, I hope so. At a pinch you might land near the ship to ask if they'd seen a corpse floating about in the drink. They would probably hand me over, but by that time I should know who was aboard and perhaps where the *Saphos* was making for."

Again Biggles shook his head. "It's too risky."

"How about sharks?" put in Eddie.

"I'm not worried about sharks," returned Biggles. "The big fellers mostly hang about off Alexandria, feeding on the offal that comes from the abattoirs. It's this leaving a man swimming so far from land. The look-out on the *Saphos* may not see him. If he did the ship might not stop to pick him up."

"In which case you do," cried Bertie.

"That's assuming we could find you. One little head in a big sea isn't easy to spot."

"I could put a smoke rocket in my pocket and let it off when—"

"No," said Biggles.

"Is it that you just don't like me swimming?"

"Yes."

"Then leave me adrift in the dinghy. There'd be no danger in that."

"If the people on that ship, supposing it to be what I take it to be, got one whiff of suspicion that you were a police officer they'd tie a lump of iron on your legs and toss you overboard."

Bertie raised his hands and looked round the company. "I ask you. Do I look like a sleuth?"

Eddie grinned. "Not exactly."

"There you are," said Bertie.

Biggles resumed. "Suppose you got on the ship. How do we get you back on the aircraft? Tell me that."

"Now hold you hard a minute, old boy," protested Bertie. "You're always telling people not to take their fences till they come to 'em. I'd find a way of getting back to you. Failing that I'd jolly soon make my way home. I've been around, don't forget."

Biggles drew a deep breath. "I've made it clear that I'm not infatuated with the scheme, but I'm prepared to admit that if it came off it would be a wizard. I still don't like the risks involved. I'll think about it and give you a definite decision in the morning when we see what the weather's like, and possibly have a better idea of where the *Saphos* is making for. Let's leave it like that. Now we'll see about having some supper. After that I shall leave it to Marcel to fix things ashore. He knows the drill with his own people."

That was how matters were left. The whole party had a good meal at a nearby restaurant, after which Marcel went off to see the authorities about refuelling. Biggles returned to the *Otter* to spend the night in the cabin,

leaving the others to make their own arrangements for hotel bedrooms.

CHAPTER VIII

BERTIE GETS HIS WAY

DAWN was creeping slowly into a world left colourless by the shadows of night when those who had slept ashore returned to the Otter. From overhead a grey sky gazed down upon a grey earth, and a grey, silent sea, as flat as a sheet of glass except where converging tracks of small craft, returning home after night fishing, had left their marks.

As Biggles made ready to move off came the daily grand parade of colour. First, the soft grey of the sky gave way to a band of palest green which, starting at the horizon, swept upward to the zenith. It was followed by a wave of primrose, which on its way turned to streaming gold, and then from gold to orange, and so to turquoise blue. Far and wide the colours flowed over the mountains of the rocky island and a sea that lay as tranquil as a great lake.

"All right," said Biggles. "If everyone's ready we'll get topsides."

Bertie was jubilant about the weather. "What about my little scheme, old boy?" he inquired.

"We'll talk about that later," answered Biggles. "The first thing is to find the *Saphos* and check her course. If she went through the Strait, as I imagine she did, there'll be a lot of open water in front of her."

"What if she stopped somewhere in Sardinia?" queried Marcel.

"We'll come back and find her there."

Nothing more was said. Biggles taxied out, took off, and climbing steadily over the southern tip of the island stood out across the Tyrrhenian Sea under a sky now pure ultramarine unmarked by even a suspicion of a cloud.

"Until we're proved otherwise I shall assume the *Saphos* is heading for somewhere at the eastern end of the Mediterranean," he told Marcel, who was still sitting beside him. "My guess is Egypt, or Syria, or somewhere between."

It was rather more than an hour before they overhauled the ship, keeping well clear of her, of course. It was really quite easy. All that was necessary was to follow up her wake which, as is usual with all steamers on a calm sea, consisted of a broad oil stain with occasional garbage jettisoned from the galley. As plain to see as a white chalk mark on a blackboard, with the sea so glassy, it ran as straight as an arrow to the south-eastern horizon. Actually, they had done this twice before, to find themselves on a false trail, the quarry in both cases, when overtaken, turning out to be an ocean tramp.

As soon as it became possible to identify the *Saphos* Biggles swung away on a different course which he held until the ship was hull down over the horizon. He then put the Otter down on the open sea and switched off the engines.

"What's the idea?" asked Ginger, from behind.

"There's no point in burning petrol unnecessarily," returned Biggles. "Now

we have her track to follow we can sit here all day, always providing the weather stays as it is."

"It will be hot presently," predicted Marcel, looking out across the empty sea. "Without a breeze we shall sizzle like chickens on a spit."

"We shall just have to bear it," said Biggles, philosophically. "Apart from using petrol I don't want the *Saphos* to see us too often."

"Here, I say chaps, what about my little scheme?" demanded Bertie again.

"It's still too early to talk about that," Biggles told him. "Did you get a line on her possible objective, assuming she's running straight to it, as she should be?"

"If she stays as she goes she'll round the toe of Italy. It looks as if she might be going through the Straits of Messina."

"What do you make the distance?"

"Getting on for three hundred miles from where she is now."

"*Mon Dieu!* That means we shall be in this frying pan for days," exclaimed Marcel, in a startled voice.

Biggles shrugged. "That may not be the end of it. This may only be the beginning. But we knew that when we started. The only alternative to carrying on is to pack up and go home. That would mean throwing away a clue, the only one we're ever likely to have, that could lead us direct to the headquarters of the gang, or the place from which they collect their supplies. However, I'll leave it to you. What do we do? Does anybody want to go home?"

Nobody spoke.

"Okay. That settles that," went on Biggles. "We carry on. When the *Saphos* has made an estimated hundred miles or so I shall follow on until I see her smoke and then sit down again. Personally, with the weather in our favour I think we're doing fine."

Eddie spoke. "I've played some queer games in my time, but this sort of Indians and cowboys set-up on the open sea is a new one to me."

"It's a new one to me, if it comes to that," replied Biggles. "I'm no prophet, but if you remember I said at the start we might be in for a long haul. In fact, that was almost certain. If anyone gets bored he can try his hand fishing. It's a good way of passing the time. There are some hand lines and hooks in the emergency locker."

Eddie's eyebrows arched. "Fishing! Say, what do we want with fish?"

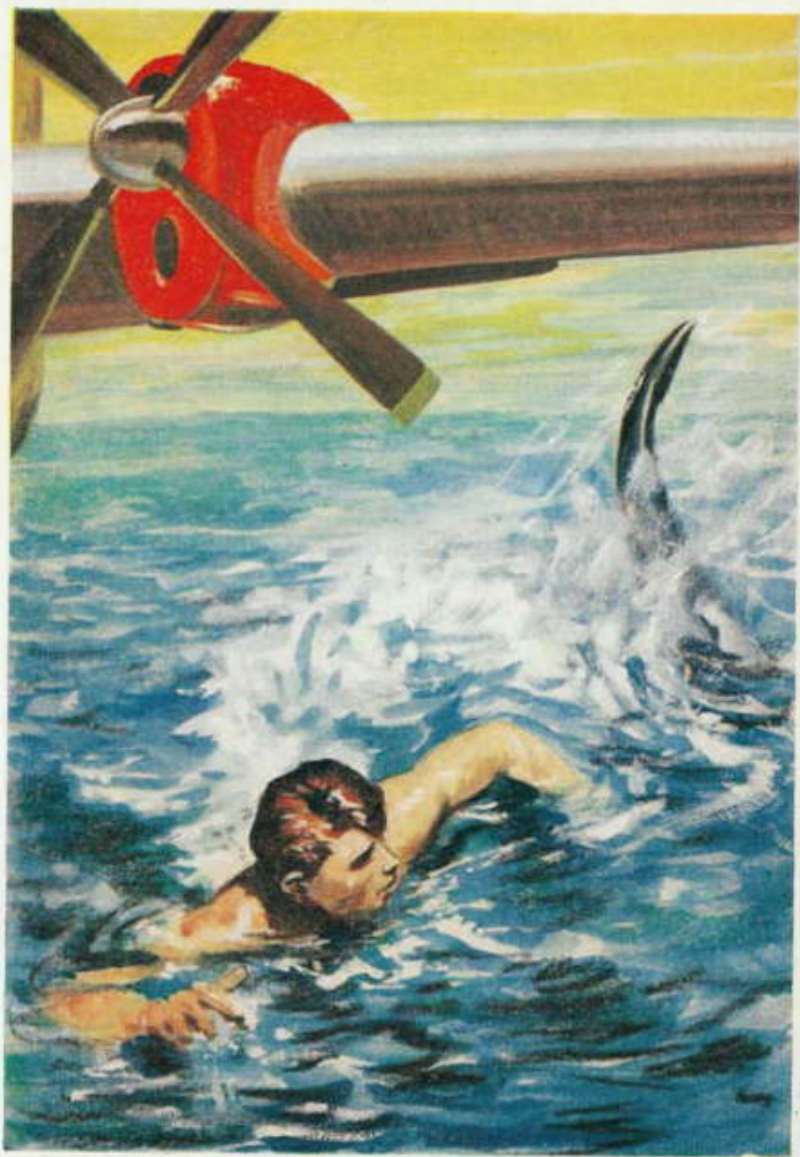
Biggles smiled. "We could eat 'em, for a change of diet. We've canned food on board; we always have; but with five mouths to fill we're likely to be on short rations before we come to the end of this jaunt."

There was a move towards the emergency locker.

Marcel had been right about the heat. As the sun climbed towards its zenith the rays it flung down became almost unbearable. The cabin became a hothouse, and they took turns swimming round the aircraft. Ginger came out of the water in a hurry when a whale floated up from the deep near them, and

having inspected the Otter went lazily on its way after astonishing everyone by its noisy breathing.

“Good job you didn’t hook that one,” laughed Biggles to Eddie, who had been fishing, without success.



"Good job you didn't hook that one," laughed Biggles

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The only other diversion occurred when a small, brightly coloured bird landed on the machine, apparently for a rest, for it soon flew on again. One or two schools of dolphins were seen, and once a formation of jets went over at a tremendous height, heading south, leaving the usual vapour trails. The

windless calm persisted. Always overhead the same blue sky, a canopy of implacable serenity. The sun toiled wearily across the heavens. All around the aircraft the lonely sea shimmered like a mirror.

“Oh for a breeze,” sighed Eddie.

“We can’t have it both ways,” Biggles pointed out. “A breeze would wipe out the trail the *Saphos* is so kindly leaving for us.”

At noon a frugal meal was made from corned beef, biscuits and jam.

“Now I think we might move on a bit,” decided Biggles, when it was finished. “We mustn’t let her get too far away.”

The engines were started. Biggles took off, and by following the track left by the *Saphos* soon brought her into sight. When she appeared on the horizon he again switched off and put the aircraft on the water.

“This is a great game played slow,” observed Eddie.

“It’s the only way it can be played,” returned Biggles.

The same monotonous procedure was followed until sundown, by which time it had become evident that the *Saphos* was making for the Straits of Messina, the waterway between the foot of Italy and the island of Sicily. A rather pleasant interlude was provided by a rust-streaked tramp, flying the Italian flag. Seeing the aircraft on the water she came over to ask if help was needed.

Biggles thanked the mariners for their courteous enquiry and said they were all right. They were, he said, merely having a rest.

The tramp went on its way, leaving a trail of ripples that set the Otter rocking. Its wake could still be seen after the ship had faded into the gathering gloom, when phosphorescence painted each little wavelet with gleaming silver.

“Now what?” asked Marcel. “Do we stay here all night?”

“Unless anyone has a better suggestion,” answered Biggles. “The *Saphos* is obviously on a set course. We know what it is. With the nearest land a long way in front of her it’s safe to assume she’ll be on the same course in the morning. The weather is everything we could wish for, and speaking personally, I’m as happy to be doing this as anything else. I loathe these dope merchants as much as the poison they sell.” He glanced at Eddie. “And now there may be a political angle to what they’re doing I hate them more than ever. What’s the use of decent people trying to keep peace in the world while these dope rats, actuated by mercenary motives, go about stirring up trouble?”

“I guess you’re right, at that,” murmured Eddie.

“Make some coffee, Ginger, and we’ll arrange watches for the night,” ordered Biggles.

With a last meal taken from the emergency store locker, and two-hour watches decided by the usual method of drawing numbers, the aircraft’s company settled down to sleep as comfortably as they might in the cramped quarters available. Ginger, who had been lucky enough to draw first watch, sat on the bows and watched the sea turn black and silver under a pale moon.

There was not a vessel of any sort in sight.

The night passed without incident and dawn again found those aboard the Otter making ready for the next leg of their strange journey. The weather remained unchanged and looked as if it might go on for some time, as is usually the case in high summer in that part of the Mediterranean. The task of shadowing the *Saphos* was resumed. The ship was overtaken in less than two hours, still on the same course as Biggles had predicted, so that it was now fairly certain that, short of making a landfall at some Sicilian port, she was heading for the Straits of Messina.

The day turned out to be a repetition of the previous one, with the Otter keeping in touch with the *Saphos* from a safe distance. With the sea like a mill-pond, showing the track plainly, this presented no difficulty. By noon the heat was blistering, and as so often happens when a number of people are cooped up in a confined space, this tedious method of progress began to tell on everyone's nerves. Two ships were seen in the distance. Ginger caught a flying fish. Swimming was prevented for a time by the arrival of a shoal of slowly drifting multicoloured jellyfish the size of open umbrellas. Again at nightfall the Otter rested on the broad surface of an ocean that seemed to lack strength to raise even a ripple.

The next evening the *Saphos* passed through the Straits of Messina to the Ionian Sea without stopping, and having done so resumed a course that remained practically unchanged. When this had been checked, and it was seen on the chart how much open sea she had in front of her, Biggles turned south for Malta where, on the production of his papers, he was allowed to refuel at an R.A.F. station. The Otter was not short of petrol or oil, but as the diversion did not take the machine too far from its course Biggles considered it worth while. Anyhow, as he said, it made a change from sitting still doing nothing.

"Goodness only knows where we're going to finish up, and on long-distance runs of this sort it's always good policy to get what you need when you can," he had advised. "We'll lay in some fresh food at the same time."

"You're not afraid of losing the *Saphos*?" queried Marcel.

"No. Not while the sea remains like this. I'm afraid she's making for somewhere in the Middle East. If so, that's where our real troubles are likely to begin. But we'll deal with those when they arise. Having come so far we might as well see the job through."

Back on the track of the ship after stretching their legs at Malta they had no difficulty in picking up their quarry. Bertie plotted her course, which would, he announced, take her round the southern tip of Greece.

"That rules out Egypt," said Biggles, looking puzzled. "I don't get it. If she was heading for Salonika, or, say, the Black Sea, one would have expected her to cut through the Corinth Canal."

"Did you think we would have to come as far as this?"

"There was an indication of it. According to what Eddie learned at Marseilles her bill of lading showed a cargo of dried fruit, much of which

comes from this part of the world. The word currant is merely a mutilation of the word Corinth.”

Three days later, mostly spent on the water to conserve petrol, Biggles was even more surprised when the *Saphos*, having rounded southern Greece, turned almost due north. “I don’t like this,” he remarked gloomily. “If she’s going to weave a passage through that maze of islands in the Aegean we look like losing her—unless we stay close enough to cause the people on board to wonder what we’re doing. What I’m really afraid of is she might be making for one of the Iron Curtain ports of the Black Sea. In that case, as we couldn’t follow her there without being arrested, or maybe shot down, we shall have had all this sweat for nothing. It wouldn’t help us much to know her destination if it was beyond our reach.”

As the Otter cruised on Bertie stepped in. “Blow me down, chaps, look at all those bally islands in front of us. Talk about a wild goose chase. Which reminds me, wasn’t it about here, a couple of thousand or so years ago, that the Greeks did some wonderful line-shooting on aviation? There was one silly ass named Icarus who must have been on an altitude test. He flew so high that the sun melted the wax that stuck his wings together. As a result of that spot of structural failure he did a nose dive into the drink.”

“This is about the place,” agreed Biggles, smiling.

“And if I remember rightly there was a yarn about another bloke, called Perseus, who whistled around shooting down Gorgons and saving maidens from ravening sea-monsters.”

“That’s right.”

“Ah,” sighed Bertie. “Aviating must have been fun in those days.”

“You may have some fun, as you call it, on this trip, before we’re through.”

“Let’s hope so, old boy, let’s hope so. Frankly, between you and me I’m finding this waffling up and down without getting anywhere a trifle dull—if you see what I mean. Wouldn’t this be a good place to try out my little scheme?”

“Must you keep on about that? If you were taken through the Dardanelles into the Black Sea we should never see you again.”

“Well, let’s have a bash at it and see what happens,” said Bertie, cheerfully. “Now’s the time, before we get tangled up in those bally islands. If I found myself going through the Darda—wachermaycallems I could always jump overboard and swim for the shore. Years ago, I recall, there was a sportsman named Leander who used to swim that ditch regularly to see his girl friend, a wench by the jolly name of Hero. She must have been the right sort, too, holding up a torch every night to keep him on his course.”

“There’s no need to get lyrical about it. He did it once too often. The night a storm blew up he went for a burton, which wasn’t so romantic. That could happen to you. But let’s quit fooling. This is serious. I hate to discourage you but this brainwave of yours bristles with too many risks. Suppose the *Saphos*

didn't see you?"

"Dash it all, old boy, they couldn't miss me if I was right in their track."

"If the *Saphos* is the sort of craft I suspect it's by no means a foregone conclusion that they'd stop and pick you up even if they saw you. You'd be in the way. Be sure they don't want stray passengers on board."

"They'd fish me out from sheer curiosity to know where I was going."

"Then knock you on the head and throw you back."

"Why should they? I'd act dumb."

Eddie came in grinning. "Say, brother, you wouldn't have to do much acting, at that, if you were crazy enough to leap in the sea hoping to be hauled out by a bunch of crooks. But I sure admire your nerve."

Biggles continued. "At the best you might find yourself on one of the smaller uninhabited islands, of which there are plenty."

"I wouldn't mind playing Robinson Crusoe for a bit. You could always pick me up."

"That might not be as easy as it sounds. People have been stuck on these islands for years," argued Biggles. After a brief hesitation he went on, "However, as you're so dead set on your lunatic scheme you can have a go at it if you like. But I'm not leaving you swimming. I insist you use the dinghy, although what reasonable yarn you'll spin for being in one I can't imagine."

"Fair enough. I'd simply say I'd been ditched, which would be true up to a point."

"Okay. Get ready. I'll make a detour to get in front of the *Saphos* before she starts zig-zagging through the islands."

"I must say you guys take chances," remarked Eddie.

"When you fly with people like Bertie there are times when you have to or you get no peace," returned Biggles, dryly, as he altered course to keep well clear of the *Saphos*, whose smoke could be seen on the horizon.

Twenty minutes later he landed on the water dead in line with the last known position of the ship and perhaps ten miles ahead of her. Already to the north could be seen the cone-shaped silhouettes of the many islands that lay before them. The rubber dinghy was inflated and made ready. Bertie, just as he was, stepped into it. Biggles gave him a final reminder of a detailed description of Alfondez so that he would know him if he saw him.

There had been a discussion on what he should take with him, but, as Bertie argued with some force, anything except the clothes he stood in would look suspicious, so he ended by taking nothing. The usual flask of water was in the dinghy as part of its normal equipment.

"Don't worry about me, chaps," were Bertie's last words. "If I come unstuck I'll swim for it, in which case you'll find me browsing on figs on one of these jolly little islands."

And so, presently, the Otter left him, a lonely speck adrift on the wide blue sea. There was some tittering at the somewhat incongruous picture he made as he squatted in his tiny craft, monocle in his eye, smoking a cigarette. But

Biggles frowned. "This is no laughing matter," he rebuked. "Bertie's taking a risk I wouldn't care to take myself. I'm allowing him to do this against my better judgment. In fact, I only agreed to this crazy plan because I could see that if I turned it down he'd have been hurt, saying I always knocked his ideas on the head."

"If this is a sample of them, brother, I'm not surprised," murmured Eddie.

Biggles took the Otter some twenty miles to the east and then went down to await the first outcome of the scheme. He waited for rather more than an hour, and then, flying low, made his way back to the track of the *Saphos*, the usual line of oil and garbage stretching from horizon to horizon.

There was no difficulty in spotting the dinghy, for the simple reason that with the exception of one or two small Greek sailing boats, of the type known as *caïques*, which had appeared in the distance, it was the only mark of any size in sight. Even before they reached it they could see that Bertie was no longer in it.

From the expression on Biggles' face it was not clear whether he was glad or sorry. All he said was: "We might as well save the dinghy. Now, whatever happens, we've got to keep in touch with that confounded ship."

This offered no real difficulty until dusk, by which time the *Saphos* was picking her way through the labyrinth of islands, some large and many small, some low but others mountainous, that lie scattered all over the Aegean Sea between Greece and Turkey. Here the lights of the ship were soon lost among those that were springing up in many places ashore, isolated or clustered in what apparently were villages.

"This is no use," said Biggles after a while. "Apart from wasting petrol there are too many high rocks about for my liking—certainly for low flying. All we can do is go down. We should be able to pick up the *Saphos* in the morning, by which time if she holds her course she should be in the region of the Northern Sporades. I'm still puzzled about where she's making for. And I don't mind admitting I'm more than worried about Bertie. But that's how he wanted it. We'll go down and spend the night against one of these smaller islands."

CHAPTER IX

LOST AND FOUND

ANOTHER brilliant dawn found the Otter again in the air after a quiet night spent in a cove, within a few yards of the shore of a small, apparently uninhabited island. Anyway, no habitation could be seen and no one came near them. Ginger went ashore intending to take a walk, but finding the going dangerous through weeds and aromatic shrubs hiding nasty-looking crevasses between the rocks, returned to the aircraft without seeing any form of life except big grey grasshoppers which made enormous leaps when disturbed. The only trees were a few sprawling figs, most of them dead and none bearing fruit. A wild vine crawling over one provided him with a few grapes with which to quench a thirst caused partly by the heat but perhaps more by the dry pollen that filled the air as he disturbed the many flowering weeds.

As soon as it was light enough to offer fair visibility, anxious to locate the *Saphos* Biggles headed north, expecting to find her in the more open water east of the Cyclades, although to be sure there were plenty of islands even there. Ginger, who had never flown over this section of the Mediterranean, was amazed by the number of islands in the Greek archipelagos. Whichever way he looked he could see islands, some of them mere rocks rising straight out of the sea, but others quite large. Most of these towered high to a central peak. All had deeply indented shores, the work of waves through the ages. On many of them an occasional village could be seen, shining whitely in the rising sun, usually near the sea but once in a while on the terraced flank of a hill.

Bluff-bowed caïques, a local serviceable type of sailing craft that has remained unchanged in these waters for more than a thousand years, were now fairly common. Their tawny well-worn sails, often patched to form grotesque patterns, made attractive spots of colour against the sapphire surface of the sea.

As the morning wore on with no sign of the *Saphos* Biggles' anxiety mounted, and again he reproached himself with what he called the folly of having allowed himself to be persuaded by Bertie to consent to an enterprise which, in the light of cold fact, looked ever more desperate.

"This was just the sort of situation I was afraid might arise," he told Marcel, bitterly.

He tried following up the tracks of ships on the placid water. They were plain enough to see, but the trouble was, now over regular shipping lanes between Greece and Turkey, there were too many of them, crossing and re-crossing as they plied from one port to another. Islands prevented them from keeping a straight course for very long.

Every track that Biggles tried ended in failure. Another difficulty was, the

Otter had often to fly so high to avoid islands that rose like miniature mountains from the sea that identification of any particular ship was difficult. He searched the waters north of the Northern Sporades, which he calculated was the limit of how far the *Saphos* could have travelled during the night, but all to no purpose.

"We're beaten," he muttered at last, irritably. "She must have turned off somewhere during the night. That, of course, was always a possibility. Had Bertie not been on her it wouldn't have mattered so much, although even that is assuming he is still on board. She picked him up. There's not much doubt about that. But they may not have kept him, as would have been the case had the *Saphos* been a normal ship."

"You think they might have put him overboard?" queried Eddie.

"They'd take no chances with a stranger. Why should they? He might see too much."

"Even so he might have swum to an island. Goodness knows there are enough of 'em. Who do they all belong to?"

"People have been fighting over 'em for as far back as history goes. Most of them are owned by Greece, but a few belong to Turkey and Italy."

"How about landing at some of these villages and asking if anyone has seen the *Saphos* go through? Folks who live by the sea usually get to know the regular ships that go past."

"You'd be lucky to find anyone able to speak English, although it could happen. Like other islanders it's not uncommon for them to go abroad, or take ship, to make some money. Having done that they nearly always drift back to the place where they were born. Home is always a magnet." As he finished speaking Biggles retarded the throttled little and began a long, shallow glide.

"What now, old warrior?" asked Marcel.

"I'm going down to think about this. I can do that on the water as well as I can up here, and while we're not yet short of petrol we shall be if we go on using it at this rate. We might make enquiries at some of these little fishing ports as Eddie has suggested. Some of them might stock a little petrol for small craft that have internal combustion engines but they wouldn't have aviation spirit. We might get some at Athens, or Salonika, but I imagine that would be difficult. It would mean answering a lot of questions, which would mean telling lies. The sympathies of people are always with their own race and class, and here the sympathy would probably be with any smugglers. Keep your eyes open, everyone. There's still a chance we may spot the *Saphos*. She may have twigged we were following her and tucked herself tight against one of these islands."

Said Marcel, as the Otter cruised on: "She might have stopped to sell off some of the cargo she picked up at Marseilles. No big ship would be likely to stop to land supplies at these little places; but the *Saphos* might, to get rid of cargo she may not really want. If she is about we ought to see her."

"True enough," agreed Biggles. "Privately-owned yachts do a certain

amount of cruising round the islands at this time of the year, but they're mostly painted white— seldom black. Which reminds me, to give you an idea of how lonely some of these islands are, a few years ago an English yacht wrecked herself on one on a dark night. As you may have noticed, the place doesn't exactly bristle with lighthouses. The owner and his wife got ashore. Do you know how long it was before they were taken off— bearing in mind that this is Europe, not the Pacific?"

"Tell me."

"Eighteen months."

"Holy pumpkins!" exclaimed Eddie, from behind.

"Sounds silly, doesn't it? But that'll give you a notion of how seldom some of these islands are visited. The truth is, there's nothing to land for, unless you happen to be an archaeologist looking for ancient Greek ruins, and I believe there are plenty of those although most of them have been pretty well searched. The famous statue of Venus was found in Milos, not far away to the south of us."

Still cruising on half throttle, slowly losing height, Biggles passed close to several islands. "We might make enquiries at that longish one ahead of us," he decided. "I haven't a clue as to what its name is, but I see what looks like a fair-sized village at the end of that creek with the mountain right behind it. There are some small craft there. One of them may have seen the Saphos. We might be able to buy some fresh fruit and eggs, anyway. If—"

Biggles suddenly broke off, leaning forward, staring. Without a word, without touching the throttle, he swung the machine away to put it between the island and the sun.

"I thought you were going down!" exclaimed Marcel.

"I was, but I've changed my mind," answered Biggles, tersely. "Don't talk. I've got to think."

Not until he was well clear of the creek, with the towering centre of the island between them and the village, did he cut the engines and begin in a series of "S" turns to lose height. "I'm going down," he said, crisply. "Keep your eyes open, everyone, for anything that looks like a building. I don't want to be seen."

A few minutes passed in silence; then Marcel said: "I don't see a house. Most of the coast seems to be cliff."

"That's fine. I'll make for that cove in front. That should suit us."

Five minutes later the Otter's keel was cutting a broad ripple on the flat water of the cove, close in, between forbidding, rugged banks. "Phew!" breathed Biggles, as the machine ran to a stop. "That was close. I'm getting careless."

"What caused you to change your mind like that?" asked Ginger.

"Didn't you see it?"

"See what?"

"The *Saphos*. And she wasn't alone. She was moored alongside another

vessel three times her size.”

“I saw nothing,” declared Marcel, wide-eyed.

“They weren’t easy to see, both being black against a dark background. It was a wisp of smoke that first caught my eye. Then I saw a yellow band on a funnel. That made me stare. The *Saphos* is there, unless it’s a similar craft belonging to the same company. This puts a different complexion on things—very different. I must be getting dunderheaded not to make allowances for the possibility of the *Saphos* keeping a rendezvous with another ship. It may mean she goes no farther than this. I couldn’t be sure, but I fancy she was taking on cargo—baskets or cases, or things of that nature.”

“The dry fruit she takes to Marseilles.”

“Could be.”

“Did they see us, do you think?” asked Eddie.

“That’s what I’d like to know. I was pretty high, and flying on half throttle I wasn’t making much noise. Much would depend on the noise the people in the ships were making. Unless one of them happened to be looking up, and I can think of no reason why anyone should gaze at the sky, we may have passed unnoticed. I wasn’t long slipping into the sun, and after that the machine would be difficult to see at all.”

“Would it matter if they did see us?” questioned Ginger. “Aircraft are pretty common nowadays, even here, I imagine.”

“It might not be all that important but I’d rather we weren’t seen. It’s a relief to me to know where the *Saphos* is. As a matter of detail, the person most likely to be looking up would be Bertie, if he’s still on board. He’d be on the look-out for us.”

“Okay. So what’s the next move in this fantastic set-up?” inquired Eddie.

“Obviously, the first thing to do is to confirm that the ship I saw is really the *Saphos*. The next, to find out what she’s doing, and how far she’s associated with the other ship. We shall want to know her name and nationality, too.”

“How are you going to get this information?”

“Not by flying over them. That would tear things wide open—unless, of course, we’ve got things all wrong. It’s still possible that these ships may be engaged in legitimate trading, Alfondez running dope as a sideline with or without the knowledge of the owners.” Biggles lit a cigarette and drew on it thoughtfully. “I was prepared to strike something complicated at the end of this trip but I’ll admit frankly that I didn’t visualize anything like this. I imagined our enquiries ending in one of the big Mid-East ports between Port Said and Istanbul; instead of which, here we are, bogged down on a second-rate island in the Aegean. That doesn’t necessarily mean the trail ends here, of course. We shall see. It’s this second ship that puzzles me. Is it bringing the dope already manufactured or is the stuff being made here? However unlikely that may appear at first glance, now that most countries in Europe have kicked out these infernal racketeers it is possible. These are the questions we’ve got

to answer, and the only place where we shall find them is in that creek where the ships are lying. But make no mistake about this. If this island is the new headquarters of a big dope ring we're sitting on a volcano. If these devils can commit murder in big cities and get away with it imagine how easy it would be here."

"Okay," said Eddie. "So we go to the creek. How do we get there?"

"There's only one way, and that's on our feet. It means walking, and from what I could see of the terrain, unless we strike a track of some sort that isn't going to be easy, even in daylight. There can be no question of doing it after dark. We'd break our necks on these rocks. If we struck really lucky we might get the information we want from one of the locals who speaks a language we understand. Not that that would alter the basic situation."

"How do you mean?" asked Eddie. "I don't quite get it."

"If the ship I saw is the *Saphos* we shall have to watch her constantly to make sure she doesn't slip away without knowing; and the sooner we're in a position to do that the better; because the most important question that arises now is, where does she go from here? Should she turn round and head back for the Western Mediterranean it'll look as if the vessel alongside is the parent ship that supplies the dope. Where does she go, I wonder, when she leaves here? But her nationality should give us a clue to that."

"Who's going on this hike?" asked Eddie.

"There's no need for us all to go. One, or two at most, should be enough. The ideal thing would be for someone to sit on the side of that mountain with a pair of binoculars, high enough to see both us, here, and the creek. A signal would then be enough to indicate the departure of the *Saphos* should she look like pulling out."

"How about the plane?" queried Marcel. "Does she stay here?"

"Why not? She isn't using petrol. She should be safe enough while the weather holds, although should a storm blow up it wouldn't be funny, particularly if we were on the windward side of the island."

Ginger stepped in. "I've been having a look at the chart," he announced. "I wouldn't swear to it, but as far as I can make out, picturing the shape of the island as I saw it from up topsides, I believe the name of this heap of rocks is Venesos."

"Thanks," acknowledged Biggles, a trifle cynically. "It's something to know where we are."

"If I'm right there should be a monastery about somewhere. The chart shows a cross, which according to the key in the corner means a religious building of some sort."

"That's not likely to help us much. The monks, or priests, or whatever they are, may get bored, stuck here on an island, but I can't imagine them indulging in a dope frolic. Rustle some grub while I try to pick out the easiest way up that hill and check there's nobody watching us."

Biggles raised the binoculars to his eyes and went slowly over the shore

line. They rested on one point for so long that Marcel asked, "What do you see?"

"I'm not sure, but I fancy this cove runs on into a creek... behind that big buttress of rock. I feel like having a look at it, because if I'm right we could tuck ourselves into it and so be out of sight of any small craft that might come along. If people from the village saw us they'd naturally talk about it when they got back, and that might bring someone along to investigate. It won't take a minute. Keep your eyes skinned for a movement of any sort. Strewh! Isn't it hot again. I could drink the sea dry."

"And all the little fishes in it, as we say in France," rejoined Marcel as Biggles returned to the cockpit.

The engines came to life and the Otter taxied cautiously towards the shoulder of rock to which Biggles had referred. Reaching it, it could at once be seen that his supposition had been correct. A hairpin bend brought into sight a narrow creek perhaps two hundred yards in length. And that was not all. All along one side there appeared work that was clearly artificial, and, judging from ancient trees, mostly olives, that overgrew it, this was of great age. As Biggles taxied right up there could be seen, hewn out of the living rock, a row of stalls, in the manner of giant stables.

The engines died. The aircraft came to rest, and Biggles joined the others on the hull. "This is better," he said. "This should do us fine, no matter what the weather does."

"What do you make of the masonry?" asked Eddie, pointing at the stalls, and some rough terracing that rose above them.

"I think I know the answer," returned Biggles. "I've seen this sort of thing before, on the mainland of Greece. What we're looking at was once a port, where, thousands of years ago, seamen parked their galleys. Or they may have built them here. No doubt there were once houses or workshops where those terraces are crumbling. There must also have been a track of sorts, leading inland, but that will have become too overgrown for us to find it."

"Gives you a queer feeling, doesn't it, to think that history we know nothing about may have been made here," said Eddie, in an awed voice.

"It'll be a queer feeling if we have to climb that hill," retorted Biggles, practically. "By the time we've clambered round that flank we shall be stewing in our own juice."

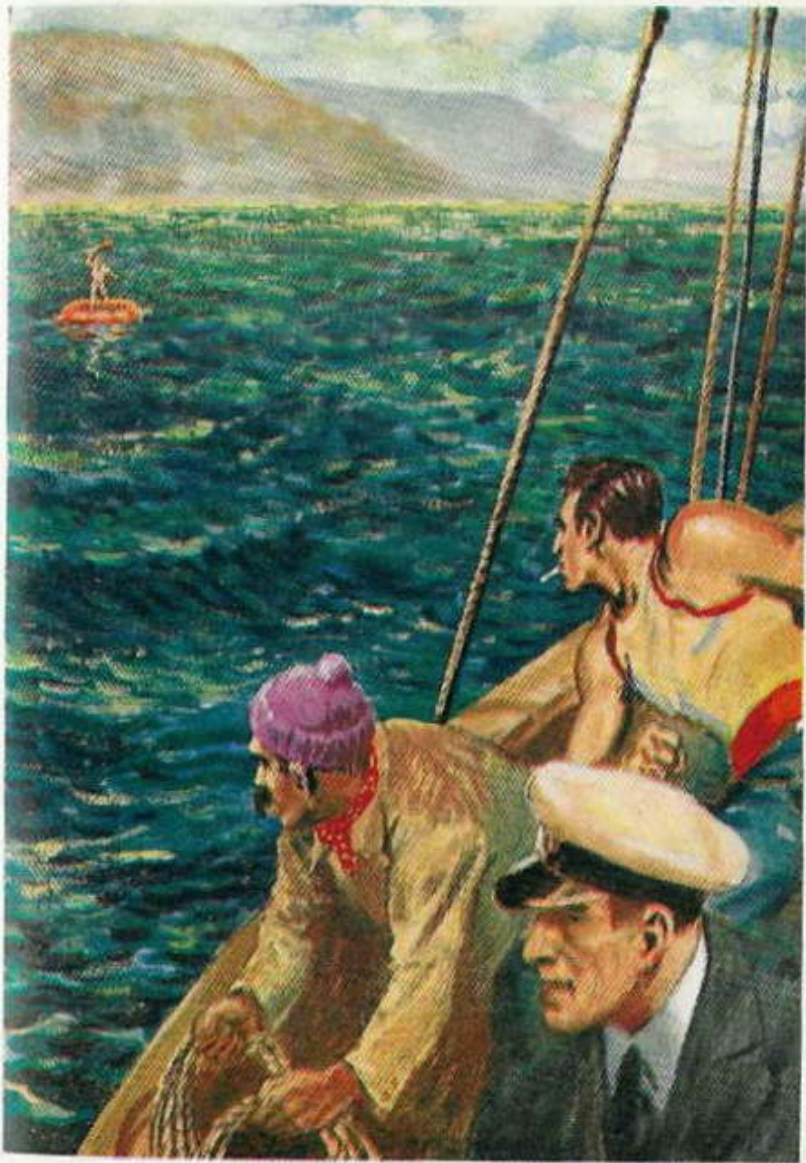
"You don't think this place is still being used?"

Biggles shook his head. "By the look of it, it hasn't been used for centuries. But let's get cracking. The *Saphos* may cast off at any time, and if we lost her after all this we should look silly." He glanced at his wrist-watch. "Let's eat and get mobile. We haven't too much time before the light will begin to go."

CHAPTER X

BERTIE GOES ASHORE

BERTIE, squatting in his cockleshell craft, knew the look-out on the *Saphos* had seen him when the ship, approaching on a line not directly head on, turned slightly towards him. He stood up and waved. As she drew near faces could be seen above the rail regarding him with the curiosity natural in the circumstances.



Bertie stood up and waved

The rest worked out exactly as he had anticipated. With way sufficient to bring her alongside the *Saphos*' engine was stopped. A line was thrown. Bertie seized it and was hauled aboard. A bell rang below. The engine was restarted and the ship resumed its journey with Bertie standing on the deck, smiling sheepishly, surrounded by seven men who looked at him more with

amusement than any other expression. One man he recognized immediately from the description Biggles had given him. Alfondez. He stood a little apart, smoking a cigarette. Another, from the sea-stained uniform he wore, was obviously the captain. The others looked like deck hands. None looked British.

"Thanks a lot," said Bertie. "Jolly good of you to stop for me." He screwed his eyeglass a little more tightly in his eye and walking to the rail pointed at the dinghy, now adrift astern. "What about my boat?" he inquired. "Can't you save it?" Getting no reply he looked round and questioned: "Does anyone speak English?"

Knowing Alfondez spoke English he expected him to answer. But he did not. His expression remained unchanged. Instead, the response came from a little stout man with dark eyes, an olive skin and a huge black handlebar moustache. "I speeka leetle," he said. "I aska da captain." Having done this and received a reply in a language Bertie did not know he went on: "No. No wasta da time. No wanta boat. No use. What you doin' here lika dat—huh?"

Bertie told the story he had ready. It was simple, and not far from the literal truth. He had, he said, been in an aeroplane which had come down on the sea.

To his relief this was accepted without question, as considering the circumstances it had every reason to be. Indeed, explanation was not really necessary, his position speaking for itself. At all events the subject was not pursued. Asked his name and nationality by the stout man, who had assumed the role of interpreter, he gave both. He was well aware that Alfondez spoke better English, and wondering why he had remained silent could only suppose he had a purpose in not revealing this. The stout man, whose name turned out to be Zander, volunteered the information that he had learnt to speak English in America. He was obviously proud of it. But this was no clue to his nationality, which as far as Bertie was concerned might have been anything. Not that it was of any importance.

It was clear that the rescue was regarded as a minor incident, for once curiosity had been satisfied the spectators drifted away and Bertie was left pretty much to himself. He thought he had noticed a flicker of interest in the eyes of Alfondez when he had given his name with his title. This he had considered advisable since it was the description shown in his passport, which he had in his pocket for emergencies. It did not occur to him that the title could make any difference to the present affair.

There was a certain amount of softly spoken conversation between Alfondez and the captain although what it was about Bertie did not know except that he, obviously, was being discussed. He had a feeling that having rescued him they were now wondering what to do with him. But this again, in view of what he knew, was only to be expected.

What he was most anxious to learn was of course the destination of the ship, since this was the main purpose of the scheme. Presently, after the captain had returned to the bridge, he asked Zander point-blank where they

were going, feeling that this, if he was what he pretended to be, would be a perfectly natural question.

The answer he got was: “You see, boy, pretty soona,” leaving him to ponder on what exactly was meant by pretty soon, since the ship was nowhere near a port of any size.

After that he was more or less left to himself, so all he could do was moon about gazing at the islands through which they were passing, none of which meant anything to him. He had no idea of their names. Only a local navigator, he thought, would be expected to know them. The sun, a fiery orange orb, dropped into the sea, and still the *Saphos* chugged on, with ever more islands appearing ahead. He noticed a radio aerial amidships but saw nothing remarkable in that.

Some time later, after darkness had fallen, he was invited to join the crew at an evening meal, which for such a ship turned out to be a good deal better than he had imagined, although the aroma of garlic was somewhat overpowering. However, he chatted inconsequentially with Zander who, having drunk some wine, was inclined to be garrulous presumably to show off his English.

“Where do you want me to sleep?” Bertie asked him.

“You donta wanta sleep boy. We soon there,” answered Zander mysteriously.

The meal finished Bertie returned to the deck, content and a little surprised that no restraint had so far been made on his movements. There, leaning on the rail, under a sky glittering with stars, he watched the pinpoints of light, some near and some distant, on the islands through which the ship was still steering an erratic course. It was evident that the man at the wheel knew well these waters, which to a stranger could be dangerous.

He was still on deck when who should join him but Alfondez, to ask questions the meaning of which at first appeared to have no particular purpose or importance. He asked Bertie, casually, what he did for a living, or if, being a lord, he did anything at all. Bertie answered truthfully that with a private income there was no need for him to work, although occasionally he took a job to prevent himself from dying of boredom. For preference, he said, he liked something with prospects of excitement. That was why he had taken up flying.

“We noticed a plane about once or twice,” said Alfondez. “Was that yours?”

Bertie said it could have been, although it might have been another plane looking for him, after he had come down on the sea.

Alfondez’s next question conveyed a hint of its purpose. “Do you like making easy money?”

“Who doesn’t?” replied Bertie, brightly.

“And you like jobs with plenty of excitement?”

“That’s me, all over,” declared Bertie, warmly. “Do you know of any?”

Alfondez did not answer. He finished the Turkish cigarette he was smoking, tossed the end into the sea and went below. He was soon back. "You come below now," he said.

"No thanks," declined Bertie. "I like it better up here."

Alfondez put a hand on his shoulder. "Below," he said, in a different tone of voice.

"You mean—I've *got* to go below?"

"Please."

"But why?"

"No questions. Come."

"All right, if that's how you want it," agreed Bertie, wondering what was coming.

Alfondez took him down and showed him into a cabin which, from some empty packing cases, was evidently used as a storeroom. There was no porthole. "Stay here," he said, and went out, closing the door behind him thus cutting off the light of the corridor outside.

Finding himself in darkness Bertie groped his way to a packing case and used it as a seat. Presently he sniffed as a faint smell touched the chords of his memory. He knew what it was. It was one of those aromas which, as Biggles had said, is never forgotten. Crude opium.

He was thinking about this and all that it implied when the note of the engine changed. Following a distant bell it presently faded to silence. Movement stopped and vague noises indicated that the ship had arrived somewhere. Where? What was going on? He groped his way to the door, only, to his chagrin, to find it locked. He returned to his seat. Some time passed. What with the darkness and the heat it seemed a long time before he heard footsteps approaching. A key turned in the lock. The door opened, letting in light, and a man entered.

For a moment Bertie thought it was Alfondez who had returned. Then he saw that although the newcomer was very much like him he had been mistaken. There was a resemblance, however, and he decided that the two men were probably of the same nationality. He had not previously seen this one on the ship. He thought he had only just come on board. He was not dressed for a sea voyage, anyway, being in an ordinary well-cut suit, without a waistcoat, which revealed a flowing tie and trousers belted in the American fashion. When he spoke in fairly fluent English but with a pronounced accent Bertie decided he too was a foreigner who had learnt his English in America.

Looking at Bertie he said, in a flat voice, "You have the bad luck."

With a wan smile Bertie agreed.

"What you do now?"

"Go home. What else?"

"To London?"

"Yes."

"You have money?"

“Enough to get me home, I hope.”

“I am told you are an English lord.”

Bertie admitted that he had such a title.

“You have passport—huh?”

“Of course. How could I travel abroad without one?”

“Show me.”

“If it’s of any interest to you.” Bertie took the document from his breast pocket and handed it over, glad that with just a situation in mind he had had the foresight to use his real name.

The man’s eyes ran quickly down the page giving particulars of the holder. “I see you are described as independent.”

“I am in that happy position,” agreed Bertie, as the passport was handed back to him. “But look here,” he went on. “Why all these questions? How about me asking some? Where are we, and why was I locked in this beastly hole? Do you think I’d run off without thanking you for picking me up? Dash it all, I’m not that sort of a cad.”

The man looked Bertie in the eyes. “Our interest in you arose from a remark you made to a friend of mine. You said you sometimes did work that offered excitement. Is that correct?”

“Within reasonable limits. Why do you ask? Do you happen to know of such a job?”

“Possibly. You see, we are merchants, and it struck us that an English lord might have access to markets not open to ordinary people.”

“Are you talking about England?”

“Yes. And if you like to travel perhaps other countries.”

“Where does the excitement come in? I wouldn’t go around trying to sell washing machines and what have you. No jolly fear. No fun in that. Not my line at all.” Bertie polished his monocle vigorously.

“It happens that we deal mostly in oriental confectionery.”

“Ah. Turkish delight, and so on.”

“All you would have to do if you entered our employment would be to arrange for the import of our products as and where directed,” explained the man, blandly.

“Really? Well, that doesn’t sound very difficult,” said Bertie, putting on his most inane smile.

The man got up. “That’s enough for now. Think over what I’ve said while I speak to our general manager. I can tell you this. The money is good. Meanwhile, stay here.”

“Do you mean I can’t go ashore?” demanded Bertie, indignantly.

“Not yet.”

“Why not?”

“Frankly, you might see too much.”

“You talk as if you were afraid of something!”

“You might. In these days of competition we strive to keep our special

markets secret. That is only a reasonable business precaution,” was the glib explanation. “I shall not keep you long,” promised the man as he went out, leaving Bertie locked in the cabin as before.

An hour later he returned, much to Bertie’s relief, for while he was satisfied with the way things were going he was finding the periods of inaction rather tiresome. His chief sensation was one of astonishment that with so little known about him he had been accepted at his face value and offered a job in the dope ring. At least, that was what it was beginning to look like. The questions he had been asked could mean nothing else. He suspected that his title had been responsible, although just how this was to be utilized was not yet clear. He had announced his title not from vanity but as a simple matter of fact, and the result was a situation he had not even considered.

The man who had entered, after a casual remark, approached him with a black scarf in his hands.

“Now what’s the idea!” exclaimed Bertie, stepping back.

“Merely a precaution.”

“Against what? What are you going to do with that rag?”

“I am sorry, but I must ask you to submit to being blindfolded. It won’t be for long. It is always our practice with strangers.”

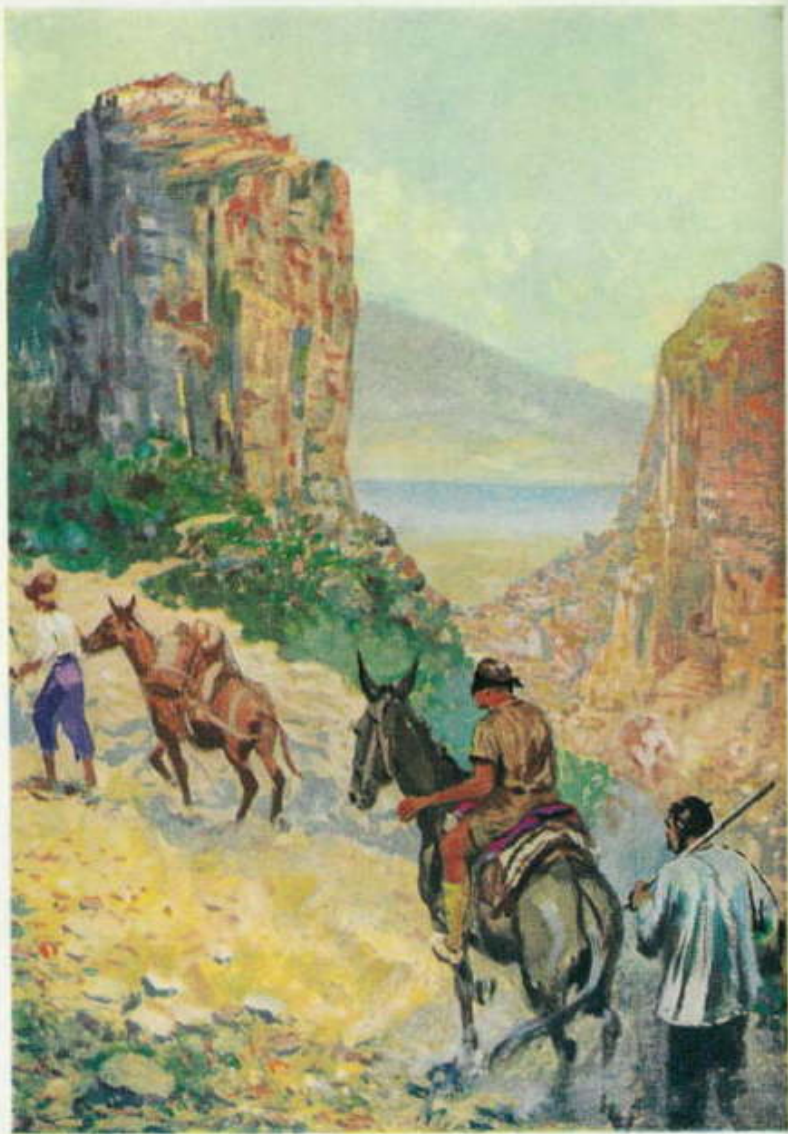
Still protesting Bertie permitted the scarf to be put over his eyes. He realized that to argue would only lead to trouble. With a hand on his shoulder he was guided to the deck and then across a gangway to the shore. A short walk and he found himself standing against an animal. “Here, I say, what’s all this?” he cried.

“A mule. Get on. You’ll find it easier than walking.”

“Well, I don’t know,” muttered Bertie, as he straddled the beast. “This certainly is a queer do. I hope by the time we’re finished with this pantomime nonsense it will have been worth my while.”

“That will depend on you,” was the smooth reply.

The mule moved forward. Bertie could hear others. He could only conclude that the party was going some distance. In the event it turned out to be something in the order of two miles, as near as he could judge, all of it up hill, often steep, with frequent sharp bends. The soft clatter of unshod hoofs on rock and the rattle of rolling stones told him that the going was rough. He visualized a narrow track winding up the side of a mountain.



... the going was rough ...

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The ride ended on a short stretch of level ground, still hard underfoot. He was invited to dismount, which he did.

"This won't be needed now," said a voice, and the bandage was removed from his eyes.

Whatever he may have expected to see, and he was prepared for something

unusual, it was far from anything he had imagined.

He was in the paved courtyard of an imposing stone building, flooded with moonlight. Pillars and arches in the manner of cloisters and Gothic tracery windows indicated a religious establishment of some sort. A line of slim, pointed Mediterranean cypresses cast oblique shadows, coal black, across the yard, where weeds flourished among the stones. A solemn silence was broken only by the deep breathing of the mules and the soft patter of their hoofs as they were led out. Far away and below glistened the sea, giving the place a strange feeling of remoteness and enveloping it in an atmosphere of unreality. The weatherworn stones breathed antiquity.

Bertie forced a chuckle to cover his astonishment. "Oh look here, I say, don't tell me we're going to church," he said.

"Not exactly," returned his guide, coldly. "Come with me."

"Is this where your manager has his office?" inquired Bertie, as they walked forward.

"Yes."

"Queer place to run a business from, isn't it—if I may say so."

"It suits us," was the curt reply.

"I should jolly well think so. Suit a lot of people—"

"Don't talk so much."

Bertie followed the speaker, with a companion walking close behind, through a massive portal that gave access to the building. A short walk down a stone-flagged corridor, lighted by a single electric light bulb in the roof, and the guide halted at a door. He tapped on it. A voice spoke. He opened it, and Bertie, blinking after the dim exterior, was ushered into a well-lighted room, comfortably, almost luxuriously furnished.

Seated in a leather-upholstered arm-chair by a table on which stood bottles and a syphon, smoking a large cigar, was a man, a big commanding figure of a man who in a city might have been a prosperous company director. His face, clean-shaven, was full; his expression, benign. There was something about him, a poise, a confidence, that told Bertie without any doubt whatever that he was in the presence of the boss.

"Sit down, Lord Lissie," invited the man, in perfect English although with a slight accent. "Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Colonel Nicolinos. Can I offer you a drink?" Then, in an aside to the guide, "You'd better stay, Ali." Bertie sat on the nearest chair.

"What would you like? Champagne?"

"I would prefer a glass of sherry."

Nicolinos indicated the bottle. "Help yourself, and make yourself comfortable. You may be here for some time. There are some questions I would like to ask you." He spoke quietly, calmly, with not even a hint of hostility.

"I shall be happy to answer them, Colonel," said Bertie, well satisfied with this courteous reception. He sipped his drink.

“You were picked up from the sea by a ship of mine named the *Saphos*. Isn’t that so?”

“I was certainly picked up by the *Saphos* but of course I had no idea of who she belonged to.”

“Where were you going when you came down in the sea?”

“Nowhere in particular.”

Nicolinos raised his eyebrows. “Are you telling me you didn’t know where you were going?”

“Strange though it may seem that is so. I had no fixed objective in mind.” This was, of course, the truth.

“I see. You were just—er—cruising around the Aegean, haphazard, so to speak.”

“More or less.”

“Were you looking for something?”

“When I’m flying I’m always looking at something.”

Nicolinos’ eyelids dropped the merest trifle. “I didn’t say *at* something. I said *for* something.”

Bertie affected an expression of perplexity. “Does it matter? Why all these questions, anyway?”

Nicolinos drew heavily on his cigar. “It might matter a great deal.”

“To whom—you or me?”

“To both of us.” Nicolas’s voice took on a different tone. “Now let us stop fencing and get down to facts. You force me to be blunt. Was your adventure really an accident or did you deliberately put yourself adrift for a particular purpose?”

This was a difficult one to answer and Bertie could only dissemble. “Why should I do such a thing?”

“That’s what I’m asking you. Please remember I’m asking the questions, which, I may say, are in your own interest. I’m anxious not to misjudge you, and make a mistake I might afterwards regret. Tell me, frankly, what brought you to these islands?”

So that was it, thought Bertie, swiftly. He had been suspect all the time.

“It may help you to make up your mind, and save prolonging this interview unduly, if I tell you I know your occupation, or at any rate for whom you were working until recently. Are you still on the strength of the Air Police Service of Scotland Yard?” Nicolinos still spoke quietly.

To show no sign of surprise at the explosion of this bombshell was beyond Bertie’s capacity. “How did you work that out?” he inquired.

Nicolinos waved his cigar with a gesture which, for the first time, indicated the vanity which comes to most men who find themselves in a position of power. “It was not very difficult,” he said suavely. “Surely you didn’t overlook a detail like the radio aerial on the *Saphos*? I was informed of what had happened. After that I had merely to radio my agent in London for full particulars of Lord Lissie. His report has just come in. It was for this you were

kept waiting before I had you brought here.”

“If you know this why bring me here?”

“Because, for security reasons which must be obvious to you, it is vitally necessary that I should know just how you managed to locate my headquarters in an area as remote as this. If it was carelessness or indiscretion on the part of one of my employees disciplinary action will be taken. You were not cruising about haphazard as you have suggested. It could hardly have been guesswork that brought you here. You were acting on information, and that, I admit, disturbs my peace of mind. Now tell me, by whom were you told of this place?”

Bertie considered the question. He was under no misapprehension about the situation that had developed. It was, all too clearly, a desperate one. The almost cordial attitude Nicolinos had adopted could be ignored. Behind the pose of calm indifference he was an unscrupulous crook who would allow nothing to stand in his way. Doing what he was doing it could not be otherwise. Now he was obviously and genuinely concerned about the weak spot in his organization that had enabled the police to pick up his trail. That, as he had himself admitted, had to be remedied, and there was no doubt about what that meant.

He, Bertie, knew what Nicolinos wanted to know, and for that one reason alone he had been treated as he had. It was the old story of the iron hand in a velvet glove. Once Nicolinos had the information he wanted he would be given short shrift; wherefore he resolved to employ deceptive tactics as the best means of delaying what would happen when Nicolinos had no further use for him. He did not even consider the possibility of help from Biggles, who might be hundreds of miles away. Confined in the cabin of the *Saphos* he had neither seen nor heard the Otter, although there was a chance of it being in the vicinity.

“Well,” prompted Nicolinos, impatiently. “I’m waiting.”

It may have been as much to cause general trouble as to stir up Nicolinos’ evident uneasiness about a possible lapse on the part of one of his staff that Bertie said: “You have a man working for you by the name of Alfondez?”

Nicolas’s started. “Yes.”

“Ask him,” suggested Bertie, evenly.

“Did you see him before you met him on the boat?”

“I know where he was, if that’s what you mean.”

“Where was he?”

“In Paris.”

“When?”

“A few days ago.”

“Where, in Paris?”

“He was in a night club called the Laughing Horse, run by a chap called Del Griko. Later, I believe, he bumped off a man named Bronnitz, in the Champs Elysées, by sticking a knife in him.”

Nicolas's stared. "Do you mean Bronnitz is dead?"

"As dead as he ever will be."

Nicolinos was silent for a moment, leaving Bertie with the impression that in volunteering this information he had dropped what he would have called a "clanger".

Nicolas's took a deep breath. "I'll speak to Alfondez immediately. Meanwhile you can tell me the rest of this interesting story."

"I'd like to think about that," returned Bertie, still playing for time.

"Very well," agreed Nicolinos. "But don't be too long about it. I will give you until tomorrow—say, nine o'clock."

"And if I fail to reach a decision?"

Nicolinos smiled. "Surely that question is quite unnecessary. In that case we shall have to try to jog your memory." He made a signal to the guide.

"Take Lord Lissie to his quarters and send Alfondez to me," he ordered.

Bertie followed the guide out of the room.

CHAPTER XI

A STRANGE ENCOUNTER

WHEN those on the Otter were ready for the overland reconnaissance the order of individual positions was resolved. It fell out that Marcel was to remain in charge of the aircraft. Biggles and Eddie were to go in front together, followed by Ginger who, always keeping them in sight at a distance dictated by the conditions encountered, was also to guard the rear to check that the leaders were not being followed.

There had been a certain amount of discussion about this arrangement. Said Eddie, sceptically, lighting one of the cigars he habitually smoked: "Say, are you sure all this Indian-scout stuff is really necessary?"

"If I didn't think so I wouldn't suggest it," replied Biggles.

"But what have we to be afraid of? We've as much right on this island as anyone."

"You may take that view, but there might be others here who wouldn't agree," retorted Biggles. "Have you an alternative plan?"

"Sure. How about me walking into that village place and asking 'em direct what's going on. That might save a heap of trouble."

A frown lined Biggles' forehead. "It might also cause a heap. Are you serious?"

"Sure I'm serious."

"I see," said Biggles evenly. "You'd just march down and say you were a cop looking for dope?"

"Why not? I can take care of myself. I've gotta gun. I'm an American citizen, ain't I? They wouldn't dare touch me."

Biggles smiled sadly. "Don't fool yourself, Eddie. Nerve is a good thing to have with you on these occasions but there's no need to throw it about unnecessarily. As I've told you before, you're not in your own country now."

"We're tough where I come from."

"Meaning that Europe is not so tough. Forget it. If that ship is what we think she is and you started throwing your weight about you'd be flat on your face without knowing what had hit you. You please yourself what you do. You're a free agent. For my part I like to know the depth of the water before I dive in off the top board. That's why I'm in favour of having a dekko at this set-up from the outside before I jump into it."

"Okay. Like you say," agreed Eddie, cheerfully. "I just thought my idea would save time."

"And mine might save us from being perforated with bullet holes. Let's say I'm nervous and leave it at that. Talking of guns, you might get a couple from the locker, Ginger. We might as well be ready should it come to a show-down. Now let's move off." Biggles turned to Marcel. "Goodness knows

when we'll be back, but if we're not here by dark keep an eye on the hill for light signals."

"Entendu."

It was late afternoon when the shore party landed on the massive stones of the ancient wharf, still quivering with heat from having been exposed all day to the sun. Without much difficulty Biggles made his way through the olives that occupied the crumbling terraces. At this stage Ginger remained with the others, fearing to lose them in the tall weeds that flourished between the trees. At the end of the top terrace Biggles struck what he said he thought was an old goat track, and as it led in the right direction they took advantage of it. This made for easier going and Ginger dropped behind a little, pausing from time to time to cast an eye over the sun-drenched slopes above them. He saw nothing of interest. The place gave the impression of seldom, if ever, being visited. He was able to quench his thirst with grapes snatched in passing from vines that often supported themselves on low-growing fig or olive trees. But these, as the track climbed higher, gave way to dwarf scrub oaks. There were few birds and no animals. The big grasshoppers that could jump so far were common. Once he saw a scorpion basking in the setting sun and made a mental note to refrain from handling rocks without a close inspection. Those were the only living creatures he saw on the way to the ridge where he thought it would be possible to see the village and its little harbour.

This turned out to be a false impression. Watching, he saw Biggles and Eddie reach it, pause, and then go on again. He discovered the reason when he climbed to the skyline. The ground dropped away a little only to rise again, as so often happens on mountains, to a higher ridge. To his annoyance and disappointment this happened several times. However, he knew the final one had been reached when he saw Biggles sink down in the brush and take out his binoculars.

Finding a seat on a shelf of rock Ginger watched them, and the surrounding hillsides, prepared for a wait and glad of the rest.

After a while Biggles came back, alone, to join him. "We can see the harbour and the ships but they're too far off in this tricky light for details to be picked out," he reported, sitting on the rock. "Both ships are still there. They seem to be doing nothing, although one or two people are moving about. There's a better track not far below us, serving some isolated cottages on the side of the hill, but we couldn't use it in daylight without a risk of being seen. That's why we stopped."

"What flag does the other ship fly?" asked Ginger.

"I'm not sure that she's flying one. It wouldn't move in this dead calm. The only way we might get her nationality is from her name, if we could get close enough to see it. Eddie wants to go on and have a closer look. In fact I had a job to stop him. The possibility of youngsters in his country being fooled into becoming drug addicts as part of a deliberate plan to sabotage America's manpower has got him hopping mad. If he had his way I believe he'd barge in and

shoot up the place. That might be a good thing. Some of our own teenagers at home are pretty wild even now; imagine what they'd be like if they had their brains rotted with dope."

"That's not a nice thought," muttered Ginger.

"It could happen. Eddie is convinced that the big ship down there is a depot ship supplying smaller craft with drugs for general distribution to the Western Alliance— particularly, of course, the States, which is his main concern."

"He could be right."

"Even so, we've no right to take the law into our own hands. Our proper course now would be to report what we suspect to the Narcotics Intelligence Bureau."

"What would they do?"

"Make a complaint to Greece about what, without them knowing it, may be happening on their territory. They would no doubt send a committee to investigate—"

"And we should have had all our trouble for nothing," put in Ginger, scornfully. "By the time the investigators got here the place would have been nicely tidied up for their reception. You know that as well as I do."

"I wouldn't deny it."

"I think Eddie's right," declared Ginger. "You've one hope of stifling this stinking racket and that's to wipe it out yourself before the stinkers running it get wise to what we know."

"That would mean sticking our necks out for our own government to lop off."

"So what? What would it matter as long as these thugs were put out of action? Whatever may be said officially to us any government would secretly approve the liquidation of a dope ring."

"There'd be a howl about what would be called foreign interference."

"Let 'em howl. If Eddie's so keen to go down why not let him?" advised Ginger. "Sooner or later we shall have to go if only to find out what's become of Bertie. He must be down there somewhere, perhaps locked up in the *Saphos*. Anyhow, there's not much point in sitting here if we've gathered all the information available from this distance."

"It's Bertie that worries me," conceded Biggles, moodily. "As you say, if he doesn't show up we shall have to go down, but it would be asking for trouble to go near those ships in broad daylight. It might be done after dark, as it soon will be. Give me a couple of minutes to think about it. I've left the glasses with Eddie. He's watching." Biggles lit a cigarette.

He finished it in a thoughtful mood and lit another. Ginger, aware that he was faced by a big decision, did not interrupt.

By the time the end of the second cigarette had been stubbed on a boulder the sun had set and the curtain of night was being drawn across the landscape, with a moon, nearly full, climbing out of the sea. Biggles rose purposefully. "We'll go down," he said. "As you say, we shan't get anywhere sitting here;

and if we're going we might as well make a start while the moon is up to give us some light to see what we're doing. Without it we'd have a job to find our way back to the machine. Let's join Eddie."

"What about Marcel?"

"He'll have to wait."

Together they walked to the spot where Eddie was lying in some wild lavender shrubs watching the harbour below, now sprinkled with lights.

"You've been a time," grumbled Eddie.

"I had to do some thinking before taking a step that might start a war," answered Biggles. "Anything doing?"

"Not a thing, except I saw some lights moving up the hillside as if they were coming this way. What are we going to do?"

"Go down, and for a start find out where that second ship has come from."

"Okay. I'm all for it."

"We can keep together now. To lose sight of each other wouldn't help matters."

They set off, in single file with Biggles leading, still following a wandering goat track that now showed more signs of being in regular use.

They had not gone far and were still perhaps half a mile from the village when from somewhere between them and the harbour a shot was fired. It was followed by shouts. Biggles stopped. "That sounds as if it might be something to do with Bertie," he said, grimly. "We'll go on as far as the main track that appeared to lead to those houses on the hillside and then wait a bit to see if there's any indication of what that shot was about. We're in no desperate hurry."

In point of fact they didn't quite reach the place Biggles had suggested. They were moving towards it, when from somewhere on the hillside below them, not far away, came the clatter of displaced stones as if caused by a man in haste. Presently his heavy breathing could be heard, and with it once in a while a curious whimpering moan.

Biggles drew his companions into the wild shrubs which covered the hill and everywhere lined the track. "Stand quite still," he ordered. "He's coming this way."

Very soon the man appeared, running, stumbling and sometimes falling, gasping for breath and occasionally moaning softly. When only a few yards away he took a hard fall. It produced a grunt of dismay. Panting, he dragged himself to the side of the track, and getting into a sitting position stared wildly in the direction from which he had come. He was obviously distraught. His face, ghastly in the bright moonlight, could be seen clearly.

"Gee whizz! It's Alfondez," breathed Eddie. "What's his game?"

"It's no game," whispered Biggles. "He's in a bad way. That shot we heard may have been fired at him. If so he must have fallen out with the gang. That should put him on our side. I'm going to speak to him."

"Are you nuts?" Eddie's voice was almost a squeak.

“Could be, but sometimes being nutty has won me a trick,” answered Biggles, softly. “Alfondez is scared stiff about something. I’d say he’s in a state to talk to anyone. This may be our chance to find out what’s happening below. I’ll gamble on it. We’ve nothing to lose.”

So saying Biggles stepped out and took the few paces necessary to reach the sitting man. Alfondez must have heard him, for at the last moment he spun round with a stifled cry of terror.

“What’s your trouble?” asked Biggles quietly.

The man’s action alone would have revealed this. He threw himself at Biggles’ feet and clawed at them in an agony of terror. “Help me,” he choked. “Help me. They’re going to kill me.”

“Who’s going to kill you?”

“The Colonel. I’ve been shot. Look! Blood! Oh! Please help me.”

Never had Ginger seen a man in the grip of such abject fear; eyes wild, shaking as if struck with ague, incoherent, he was completely beside himself. Such stark cowardice hardly seemed possible.

“Do you know who I am?” asked Biggles.

“No.” With jaw sagging Alfondez stared at Biggles’ face. “Yes. I’ve seen you somewhere. It doesn’t matter. Will you save me?”

Biggles made no effort to hide his contempt. “Why should I save you?”

“You’re British. You wouldn’t see a man murdered.”

“That, coming from you, is pretty rich,” sneered Biggles. He listened, staring down the track. There wasn’t a sound. Turning back to Alfondez he went on: “Where are you wounded?”

“My hand. Look.”

Biggles glanced at what was no more than a graze and thrust the hand away. “That won’t kill you. Forget it. Why were you shot at?”

“They said I was a squealer.”

“Who said?”

“An Englishman we picked up out of the sea. Called himself a lord.”

Biggles seized Alfondez by the front of his collar and dragged him to his feet. “Pull yourself together and answer my questions or I’ll take you back down the hill, you miserable rat.”

“Yes. Yes.” Alfondez passed a hand over a sweating face. “I’ll tell you anything,” he offered eagerly, desperately.

“What happened after you picked up this Englishman?”

“Nothing. The skipper of the ship I was on—”

“The *Saphos*?”

“Yes. He radioed to the Colonel.”

“Who was here?”

“Yes. He lives here.”

“Go on.”

“When we arrived here the Englishman was taken to the Colonel.”

“Who is this Colonel you’re talking about?”

“Nicolinos.”

“Is he the boss here?”

“Yes.”

“Go on. Then what happened?”

“By that time Nicolinos knew the Englishman was a spy.”

Biggles stared. “How did he find that out?”

“Nicolinos had radioed his agent in London to find out all about this man who called himself Lord Lissie. The message came back it was true he was a lord but he was also a cop at Scotland Yard.”

“I see. Carry on.”

“Nicolinos asked Lissie how he had learnt about his hideout here. Someone must have told him, he said. Who was it? Lissie said *I* told him. That was a lie. I never told—”

“Just a minute. How do you know about all this?”

“The man who took Lissie before Nicolinos was my brother Ali. He was there all the time. He heard everything. He was sent to fetch me and I knew what that meant.”

“What did it mean?”

“I’d be shot. Nicolinos’ fear always has been a squealer. He’d have shot me himself. I’ve seen him kill—”

“I gather that what happened was this. When your brother was sent to find you he tipped you off.”

“Yes. Of course he told me. He’s my twin brother.”

“And knowing that you’d been put on the spot you bolted.”

“Of course I bolted. What else could I do? Let myself be shot? They came after me but I ran fast and got away. That’s the truth, as Allah is my judge. Please help me. I’ll tell you everything. This is an island. They’ll hunt me and catch me. I can’t get away.”

“How do you suppose I can help you?”

“Take me with you?”

“Where?”

“Anywhere. Here I’m doomed.”

Biggles turned to the others. “I’d say he’s telling the truth, but there’s something about it I don’t understand. I can’t see Bertie telling this colonel fellow that Alfondez had spilt the beans. That isn’t like him. Why should he? Alfondez’ brother must have got it wrong—unless it was a deliberate double-cross.” He turned back to Alfondez, who was still on the verge of hysteria.

“Where is Lord Lissie now?”

“Locked up in the monastery.”

“*Where?*” Biggles looked incredulous.

“The old monastery where the Colonel lives.”

“What about the monks?”

“They left years ago. The place is half in ruins. Lissie has until tomorrow to tell Nicolas’s everything—what he knows and how the police—”

"And if he doesn't talk?"

"They'll shoot him like a dog whether he talks or not."

"Is this monastery where the heroin is made?"

Alfondez looked up. "You know about that?"

"Of course. Is it?"

"Yes. They make it there. You see, I'm telling you everything. Will you save me? They'll kill me if—"

"You've said that before. What's that big ship doing in the harbour?"

"It brings the opium."

"From where?"

"China."

"And the *Saphos* distributes the finished dope?"

"Yes. The Russian ship—that's the big one—goes on to Odessa."

"Does the captain of the *Saphos* know what he's carrying?"

"Of course. He's employed for that purpose. The *Saphos* belongs to him. He's always been a smuggler."

"Who employs him?"

"I don't know. It doesn't do to ask questions."

Biggles turned to Eddie. "You weren't far wrong." Back to Alfondez he said: "Where exactly is this monastery?"

Alfondez pointed diagonally down the hillside. "There. You can't see it because of the trees."

"How far?"

"Perhaps one mile by the way I know."

"Good. You can take us there. Lead on."

Alfondez gasped. He looked stricken. "Me go? No—no. Not that. Not for all the money in the world would I go near that place."

"In that case you may stay here. When I see Nicolinos I'll tell him where you are."

"But he will kill me."

"I hope he does," retorted Biggles, mercilessly. "It's time someone did."

"If I show you the way to the monastery will you take me away with you when you go?"

"I'm going to France. The French police will be delighted to see you."

"Why?"

"You murdered Bronnitz, didn't you?"

"That was under orders. If I don't obey orders I die."

"From what I can see of it you're likely to die anyway. You can please yourself whether you stay here to be shot or go to France and face the guillotine."

To Ginger's disgust Alfondez sank down and burst into tears. "I don't want to die," he moaned.

"For Pete's sake," muttered Eddie, disgustedly. "What a specimen. Come on, Biggles. If they're all like this what say we go down and clean the whole

place up? I guess it should be easy.”

“Before doing anything else we must get Bertie out.”

“Sure. We’ll do that, pronto.”

Biggles looked down at Alfondez. “Well, have you made up your mind? Do you stay here or are you coming with us?”

Alfondez, still sobbing, got up like a man resigned to the worst. “I will show you the way to the monastery,” he said. “I know you won’t let them kill me,” he added, hopefully.

“Quit bleating, brother, or they may hear you,” grated Eddie.

The sobbing ended abruptly.

“Lead on,” ordered Biggles. “Any nonsense and I’ll shoot you myself.”

CHAPTER XII

THE MONASTERY

THEY set off down the rather steep, stony track, Alfondez, still choking back an occasional sob, leading the way. That he knew the locality well was clear from the confidence with which he crossed several intersecting tracks without hesitation and made detours round the isolated cottages to which presumably they led.

“Do the people who live in these houses work for Nicolinos?” asked Biggles, after passing one.

“They don’t want to but some have to.”

“Why, if they don’t want to?”

“They are afraid of him. He does what he likes here.”

“Do they know what’s going on?”

“I don’t think so. They are ignorant peasants who think only of their goats and olives for the making of oil which they sell in the village.”

The way now led through a grove of olives, their slim grey leaves silvery in the moonlight. Most of the trees were obviously of great age, their trunks warped and twisted into grotesque shapes by the relentless hand of time. Not a few had fallen, creating an impression of petrified prehistoric monsters.

“Say, these trees weren’t planted yesterday,” observed Eddie, during a brief pause.

“Nor the day before,” answered Biggles, dryly. “They could have been planted by Greek or Roman colonists anything up to two thousand years ago. Anyway, that’s what they’ll tell you on most of the Mediterranean islands where you’ll find plenty like this. Carry on, Alfondez. Why have we stopped?”

“We get close. I am afraid.”

The Egyptian, now moving more cautiously, crept forward to a slope of fallen boulders that had once been the wall of a terrace, and there, still some distance below, were the scattered lights that marked the position of the little harbour. Also below but much nearer rose the extensive pile of a tall building, shining almost white where the moon struck it and coal-black on the nearer side. A part of what had once been a bell tower had fallen and much of the rest appeared to be in ruins. Not a light showed anywhere. A few sounds came from the distant village but as far as the monastery was concerned the hand of death might have fallen on it. Rows of sombre cypresses thrust their tapering spires into the sky.

“What do you make o’ that?” asked Eddie. “It looks to be fallen down.”

“It probably is,” returned Biggles. “It has been there, or part of it has, for a long time. That may be why the religious order that occupied the place moved out. From those pillars at the end I’d say that originally there was a Greek

temple here. The main building was put up later on the same site—much later. Those narrow windows with pointed arches are Gothic—say, the Middle Ages.”

“There doesn’t seem to be anyone about. You sure this chicken-livered polecat isn’t fooling us?”

“I wouldn’t think so. Why should he, knowing it wouldn’t take us long to spot it?”

“Why would Nicolinos choose a dump like this for his racket?”

“Why not? It’s off the map. A stranger wouldn’t come here once in a blue moon. It’s as quiet a spot as could be found anywhere in Europe today. But let’s get on. The place covers a lot of ground so finding Bertie isn’t going to be easy.”

“Alfondez may be able to tell us where he’s most likely to be.”

Biggles put the question to him.

The guide raised his hands, palms upward, in a gesture of helplessness.

“How would I know?”

“Have you no idea?”

“I remember a prisoner was once kept in one of the cells where the monks slept.”

“You must know where Nicolinos lives.”

“That part is only to be reached from the courtyard. The entrance is on the far side, facing the village. The road ends there.”

“Is there no other way into the building?”

“I don’t know. I have never looked. Everyone uses the main entrance.”

“Where is the dope made?”

Alfondez hesitated.

“Speak up!”

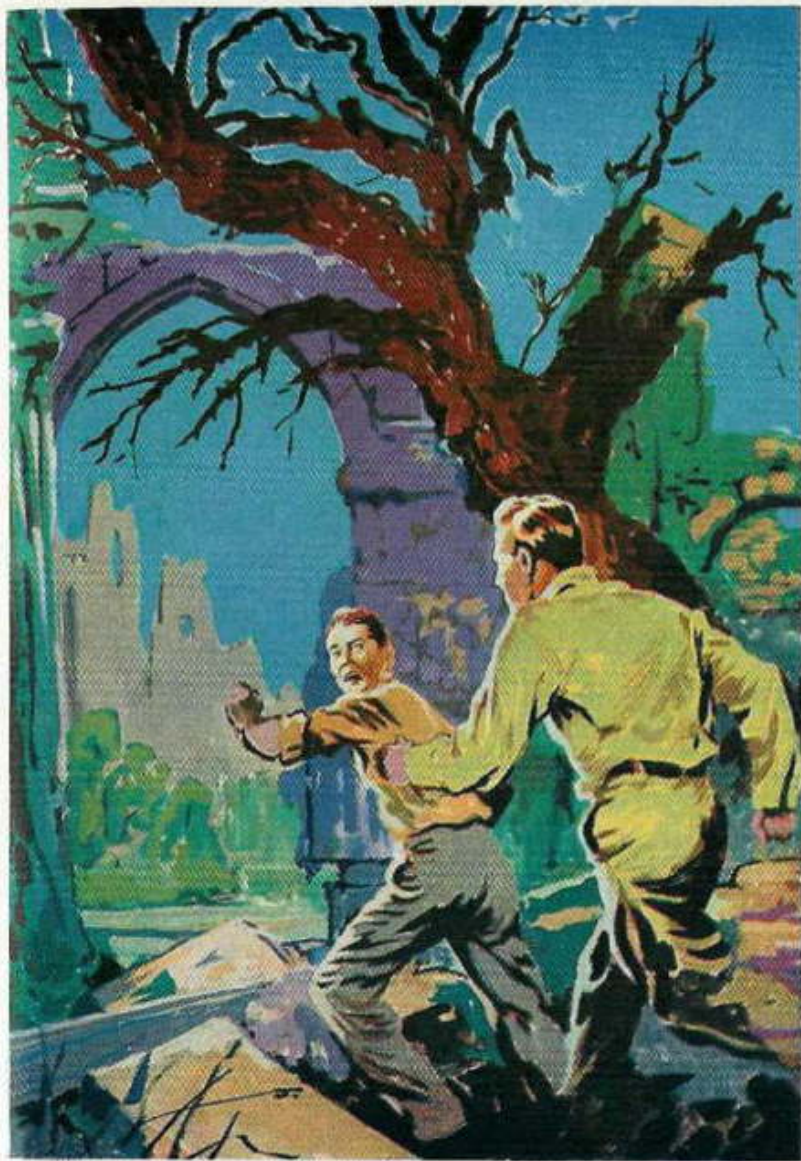
“In the chapel. It is not a chapel any more,” blurted Alfondez, as if terrified by what he was saying.

“Let’s get closer,” said Biggles.

He had started to climb down the boulders, but stopped when from somewhere not far away came the voice of a man singing. The words were in English, and to Ginger nothing had ever sounded more incongruous; for the mournful ballad was one once popular in the early days of war flying.

“Who cares to the dust returning;
Who shrinks from the sable shore;
Where the high and haughty yearning
Of the soul shall be no more.”

“That’s Bertie,” snapped Biggles. “Come on. He must be reckoning we’re somewhere about.”



"That's Bertie," snapped Biggles

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Jumping down to the next terrace, rounding fallen trees and ducking under low-hanging branches he hurried on, guided by the sound as the singer continued.

"So stand by your glasses steady,

This world is a world of lies,
A cup to the dead already
A glass for the next man who dies.”

When the building was reached the voice was coming from above, on the moonless side, where, some twelve to fourteen feet up a smooth stone wall could just be discerned a row of narrow apertures that were evidently unglazed windows.

“Bertie!” called Biggles, sharply.

“Hello, old boy,” came Bertie’s voice, cheerfully. “I was hoping you were in the offing; hence the warbling.”

“What’s stopping you from getting out?”

“Bars of iron, laddie, bars of iron. Two of ‘em, built into the stone. Can’t budge ‘em.”

“What about the door?”

“Locked. No use. Must weigh half a ton.”

“Docs Nicolinos know we’re on the island?”

“Not as far as I know. He didn’t mention it to me when we were nattering some time ago.”

“Have you any idea of how we could get you out?”

“Not a clue.”

Biggles surveyed the wall. There was not even a finger hold. “Not a hope,” he told the others. Then, to Bertie, “Why are they keeping you?”

“Nicolinos wants to know how I ran him to earth. He’s worried, I can tell you. I have an appointment with his firing squad in the morning.”

Eddie broke in. “Aw shucks! What are we waiting for? Let’s go in and mop up the whole dirty outfit.”

“Just a minute, Eddie,” requested Biggles impatiently. “What an impetuous fellow you are. What do you want to do—start a war? Get it into your skull that we’re not in our own countries. We haven’t even permission to land. Which means that if there’s a rumpus whichever way it ends we shall be in the wrong. If we don’t want to end up in a Greek gaol we shall have to play this game with the soft pedal on—for as long as that’s possible, anyhow. Before we go off at half cock let’s be sure of our ground.”

“Okay,” agreed Eddie, contritely. “But I get mad—”

“So do I, but I don’t let it drive me round the bend. We might do something with a rope and a file. There must be tools about. I wonder if Alfondez could tell us—hello, where’s he gone?” Biggles looked around, peering into the darkness.

“Skipped it, by the look of it, the yellow skunk,” muttered Eddie.

“Wouldn’t surprise me if he’s gone to tell Nicolinos we’re here, hoping to put himself right with the gang. If he’s got a gun he’s liable to get the drop on us from cover, for the same reason. I wouldn’t put anything past that four-flusher. We should have given him something to keep him quiet.”

“It’s a bit late to talk about that,” returned Biggles. “Well, it’s no use going

after him. Let's see about getting Bertie out."

"Sure."

"As there's nothing we can do from here the job will have to be tackled from the inside."

"That's okay with me, brother." Eddie drew his gun, a squat automatic. "Let's go."

Biggles hesitated. "Ginger, do you think you could find your way back over the hill to Marcel?"

"I doubt it, in the dark. Why?"

"I was thinking that if this sortie came unstuck Marcel would never know what we know. He should have the gen. He could then pull out and report what goes on here. In that case we wouldn't have wasted our time."

"It won't help matters if I lose my way."

"You're right. It's a big risk. We might do better to compromise. I'll go in with Eddie. You watch from outside. If we don't come out make the best of your way home and report. You should be able to manage it in daylight."

"Fair enough, if that's an order."

"It is." Biggles looked up at the window. "Stand by, Bertie. We're coming in. Come on, Eddie. If we're shot at, shoot it out with 'em. Once we start there can be no stopping."

"You betcha life."

Gun in hand, Eddie on his heels, Biggles started off along the side of the building to reach the only gateway by which, according to Alfondez, the courtyard could be entered. Without knowing the lay-out of the interior of the monastery there was of course no point in trying to make a plan.

"We shall have to take things as they come," he told Eddie, during a brief pause to reconnoitre the ground ahead.

They went on, stopping from time to time to listen for sounds that might indicate the position of an enemy. Nothing happened. Not a sound broke the heavy silence and in due course they reached the angle beyond which another step would take them into the moonlight. Again Biggles stopped to listen. After a few seconds he turned to Eddie. "Can you hear something?"

"Sure. Some guy whispering. Round the corner."

Dropping on his knees Biggles risked a peep which became rather prolonged. Rising and turning to Eddie he breathed: "It's Alfondez. He's talking to a man so much like him that I think he must be the brother he told us about. They're standing just this side of the main gate."

"So that dirty cur did rat on us."

"I imagine he's telling his brother about us. We can't get near the gateway while they're there."

"Why not?"

"They'd see us, and that'd send the balloon up."

"Not if we stuck our guns in their ribs. Alfondez would swoon from fright if I know anything."

“Wait a bit.”

How long the delay would have been had other factors not interfered is a matter for conjecture. For all practical purposes matters were taken out of Biggles’ hands when things began to happen; and having started they followed each other in such quick succession that it was not easy to keep pace with them.

They began when three men stepped suddenly from behind a line of cypresses that followed the road to the arched entrance to the monastery. From their behaviour these may have been the men who had pursued Alfondez, for with one shouting his name they ran forward. Alfondez fled, making for the nearest point of the trees. A shot was fired at him. It missed. Alfondez reached the trees and dived through them with his pursuers close behind. The three newcomers followed. Behind them ran the man to whom Alfondez had been talking. He was shouting in a protesting sort of voice although what he said meant nothing to Biggles who did not know the language used. He in turn disappeared through the trees, from where there now came a considerable amount of noise.

“This is our chance,” said Biggles, urgently, and he had started to move when following a shout came three shots, punctuated by a scream.

“I reckon that was Alfondez,” said Eddie.

“No matter. Come on.”

But Biggles had taken no more than half a dozen paces when he went flat, dragging Eddie with him, as from the monastery ran out two more men, looking about them, apparently seeking the cause of the shooting. Hearing the noise behind the trees they hurried on towards the spot; but before reaching it the man thought to be Alfondez’ brother came out, waving his arms and shaking his head as if in distress. Seeing the two men coming back towards him he called something, pointing, and turned back. All three disappeared behind the trees from which now arose a violent altercation, as if someone was being accused and another defending. Voices rose to a crescendo but ended as abruptly as if a radio had been switched off when a command, or what sounded like a command, cut in.

“If they’ll go on bumping each other off we shan’t need our guns,” remarked Eddie, optimistically.

“Keep going,” snapped Biggles, now walking quickly towards the pillared entrance to the courtyard with an eye on the trees, behind which voices could again be heard in conversation.

Abandoning caution in the need for haste Biggles ran on to the objective and darted through into a fairyland of moonlight and grotesque shadows. He looked around for a door. A yellow artificial light revealed one, open, with a corridor beyond. He strode to it. A few paces along the stone passage a side door stood ajar. He pushed it wide open to expose a well-furnished sitting room with signs of recent occupation. A cigar smouldered in an ashtray. A glass, half full, stood on a table. A revolver lay beside it.

"This looks like it might be Nicolinos' den," observed Eddie.

"He must have been one of the men we saw go out."

"What do we do? Wait for him to come back and have a show-down?"

"No. It's unlikely he'll be alone. I'd prefer to delay the fireworks until they become really necessary. The thing is to get Bertie before we do anything else."

"How are you going to find him?"

"All we can do is make a search. We might as well draw Nicolinos' teeth before we start." Biggles picked up the revolver and put it in his jacket pocket. "Let's go on and find the stairs. From the position of Bertie's window his room must be on the first floor."

They were striding along the corridor when a stout, heavily-whiskered man, carrying a plate-laden tray, appeared suddenly from a side turning in front of them. He came on, looking neither surprised nor upset until Biggles poked a gun into his stomach. Then he dropped the tray with a crash and raised his hands, making it clear that he was not in a mood to argue.

"You speak English?" demanded Biggles, fiercely.

"Leetle bit—donta shoot," was the answer.

"Where have you been with that tray?"

"I takka da dinner to man."

"What man?"

"Dunno name."

"Englishman?"

"I tink so."

"Have you the key to his room?"

"It wass on de tray."

Eddie stooped and picked it from the debris. "Okay," he said.

"Is this man upstairs?" questioned Biggles.

"Yessa."

"Show us the room."

"Yessa. Donta shoot. I have wife anda family."

"You won't be shot while you do what you're told," promised Biggles. "Get going."

The man made no protest. Biggles took him to be a local Greek employed as a cook or general servant. At all events he showed no signs of hostility and was clearly unconcerned about what went on in the monastery provided his life was not endangered. The little procession, the hostage leading and Eddie watching the rear, walked quietly along a stone corridor lighted only and intermittently by moonlight striking aslant through narrow arched slits in what was obviously an outer wall. Presently a flight of steps swept upwards in a wide curve. Up these went the guide to another long corridor with doors, all exactly alike, on one side. Moonlight still filtered in through the same narrow slit-like windows on the other side. With their footsteps echoing eerily the party proceeded until the guide eventually stopped at the end door.

“Man in dis one,” said the guide. “You no tell Colonel I show you?”

“I won’t tell him,” promised Biggles.

Eddie inserted the key in the lock, turned it and thrust the heavy door wide open. The room was in darkness.

“You there, Bertie?” called Biggles, briskly.

Bertie stepped into the corridor, smiling. “Jolly good,” he said.

“Come on,” returned Biggles. “We can talk later. Let’s see about getting out of this rabbit warren. Here, take this. You may need it.” Biggles handed over the revolver he had taken from the room below.

“Where did you get this lump of ironmongery?” asked Bertie.

“I won it on the way here. I fancy it must belong to this Colonel type, Nicolinos.”

“You weren’t long finding me. Did old George show you the way?” Bertie jerked a thumb at the guide.

“He did.”

“What are you going to do with him?” asked Eddie. “We shan’t need him any more. He may get in the way, or start yelping for help.”

“That’s true,” agreed Biggles. “We might as well leave him here. We needn’t lock him in. He’ll stay put if I tell him to.”

The waiter was pushed into the room. “You stay here and you won’t get hurt,” said Biggles, closing the door and leaving the key in the lock. “Now let’s get mobile,” he told the others, and led the way back down the corridor towards the steps.

His purpose, as he had said, was to get out of the monastery as quickly as possible and, naturally, he made for the only exit he knew. So far things had gone exceptionally well, better than could have been expected, and he hoped that the luck might last for a few more minutes.

In this, however, he was soon to be disappointed.

CHAPTER XIII

GUNS SPEAK

IT was just before they turned into the passage from which Nicolinos' room led off, marked by the reflected glow of the electric light, that hope of a quick departure in that direction faded. A medley of footsteps and voices coming from the opposite direction suggested that the men who had gone out were on their way to Nicolinos' apartment. Biggles stopped, of course, making a gesture that might have been annoyance or impotence.

"They may go in and shut the door," he said softly.

This was a reasonable supposition, but it did not happen. The men trooped into the room, but, as a quick peep revealed, they did not close the door. What was even worse, two men remained in the passage, talking.

"Now what, old boy?" queried Bertie.

"We can either wait, hoping they'll all go in presently, or we can look for another way out. There's bound to be another door somewhere, or failing that a man-sized window. Which way did you come in, Bertie?"

"This way. I saw nothing outside because I was blindfolded."

"It'd take a cat all its time to get through any windows I've seen," said Eddie. "This place must have been built for a siege."

"It probably was. Until recently these waters were stiff with sea-rovers looking for plunder."

"What about bursting that light bulb with a bullet?" suggested Eddie.

"There's only one. We could get past in the dark. They wouldn't dare shoot for fear of hitting each other."

"Could you hit that bulb—at fifteen yards?" inquired Biggles.

"Maybe not. Then how about cutting the lead?"

"Where is it?"

"From the way the light flickers it's direct current," stated Eddie. "There must be a dynamo somewhere, run by a power unit of sorts. Let's find it and bust it and put the whole place in darkness."

"It would probably be easier to find another way out," opined Biggles.

"This can't be the only exit. There should be some sizable windows. We're asking for trouble standing here, although as Nicolinos obviously has no idea we're in the building we might hang on a couple of minutes to see if they shut that confounded door. No doubt they're discussing that shooting, and what went on outside."

"What do you reckon that was about?" asked Eddie.

"Someone was shot. I think it must have been Alfondez. I imagine he was telling his brother about us. From the way he bolted when those three men appeared I'd say it was the party that had been out looking for him. By the way, Bertie, he told us you were responsible for putting him on the spot by

telling Nicolinos it was he who had spilt the beans about this place. Is that true?"

"Not exactly. Nicolinos asked me how I'd got wind of his headquarters. I dodged the question by saying, ask Alfondez. I didn't actually say he'd squealed in so many words though I'll admit I hoped to cause trouble. Why not? At that time I was having a spot of trouble myself."

"Aw shucks! What does it matter," put in Eddie. "Who cares? If that dirty crook has been bumped off so much the better for everyone. Let's do something. I can't stand doing nothing. They're still arguing."

"I just heard Bertie's name mentioned," said Biggles. "If Nicolinos should decide to send for him, to check up what Alfondez' brother must have told him, things will start humming. Let's get out of this somehow. If we can't find another way out we shall have to come back here, that's all."

So saying Biggles started off down the corridor in the direction of the steps. Reaching them, instead of going up to the first floor he carried straight on, walking slowly on account of the deep gloom. That is not to say it was pitch dark; but the only light, a feeble one, was a patch of moonlight farther on. When they reached it they found it came through a hole where part of the masonry had collapsed; but it was too small for a man to get through. Moreover, the old stonework was in such a state that it would have been dangerous to attempt it. However, the wan light revealed a heavy, old oak door, on the opposite side.

"Let's see what's in here," said Biggles.

Half expecting to find the door locked, he was reaching for the handle when he stopped, staring back along the corridor from the far end of which came echoing a clatter of fast moving feet and a shot. It was followed by a babble of voices.

"That sounds to me, Bertie, as if they've discovered you've flown," said Biggles. "If so, that knocks on the head any idea of going out that way. But let's press on. Ginger's waiting outside. He'll be in a rare sweat having heard shooting. He'll imagine we were involved in it and will be wondering why we haven't come back."

Finding the door unlocked he pushed it open, took one pace and then came to a halt, staring. "Suffering Icarus!" he exclaimed. "What's all this?"

He obviously did not mean the question to be taken seriously for what was before him must have been evident to them all. Moonlight slanting in through a series of tall Gothic windows, devoid of glass, showed a vast vaulted chamber that was, or had been, the monastery chapel. There was no one in it, but there was plenty to claim attention, things which, it may be supposed, would have astonished the original worshippers.

The place had been stripped of pews and other church furniture but in some queer way it retained the atmosphere of its purpose. Down the middle, where the main aisle must have been, was a line of benches, tables and trestles. On these were bottles, jars, beakers and retorts, set out in the manner of a

laboratory. A certain amount of miscellaneous equipment stood about or littered the floor, scales, sacks, packing cases and the like.

Biggles sniffed. "I smell opium." He pointed to some sacks. "I'd say that's it."

"So this is where they make the foul stuff they dish out," muttered Eddie. "Alfondez said they used the chapel as a workshop. What a devil's kitchen!"

There was a click and the place was flooded with light from lamps over the benches.

Biggles spun round. "Who did that?" he rapped out.

"I did," answered Eddie. "I found the switch just inside the door. I reckoned they'd have lights here."

Biggles didn't look pleased. "We didn't need them," he reproved. "You realize all this light will be seen from outside?"

"So what?" returned Eddie, recklessly. "Let's see all there is to see while we're here."

"All right, but don't be long about it, because with the place blazing like a gin palace we're likely to have visitors."

"Let 'em come," growled Eddie. "When I think of what goes on here I get all lit up myself."

"Absolutely, chaps. I'm with you," murmured Bertie.

Eddie was now at the nearest bench, examining what lay on it. It was almost entirely covered with small cardboard boxes, coloured paper and other stuff that looked like packing material. There were labels, gum and heaps of small, square, brownish objects. He picked up a label and read the printing on it. "Say, get a load o' this," he called.

"What have you found, a consignment of chocolate drops?" asked Biggles, looking interested.

"Not on your life. They must know we're wise to that line of poison and have switched to caramels and bubble gum. These labels say manufactured in the United States—the lying hounds."

"You can thank your newspaper publicity for that. Put one of those labels in your pocket for evidence. Bertie, switch those lights off. There's no need to tell Nicolinos where we are, if he doesn't know already. Watch the door. We've seen all we need to see. Let's go. This window is what we were looking for. It's big enough to get through."

Eddie was still looking at the stuff on the tables. "Wait, Bertie," he cried. "Are you going to leave this doped candy?" he asked Biggles.

"What else can we do with it? We can't take it with us."

"But it's booked for the States. I'm not letting that happen, no *sir*."

"What do you suggest we do with it?"

"Burn it. This should help." Bertie held up a large bottle of colourless liquid.

"What is it?"

"Methylated spirit. They must use it for these burners. There's plenty of

it.”

“You’ll set the whole place on fire.”

“So what? We might as well let these rats know we’ve been here.”

Biggles frowned. “That’s a drastic way of doing it. You still seem determined to make this an international front page newspaper story.”

“I don’t care. It’d set this gang back a bit. To just walk out would leave ‘em free to start again somewhere else. You said that yourself.”

For a moment Biggles hesitated. “Okay,” he agreed. “But make it snappy. Give him a hand, Bertie, while I have a dekko through the window to see where we are.”

Having dragged a chair to the window to give him the necessary height he stood on it, and looking out saw it overlooked the side from which they had made their approach to the building. He whistled.

The answering whistle came instantly. Ginger appeared. “Where are you?”

“Up here—at the window. I thought I’d let you know we were all right. Stand fast. We shan’t be long.”

“What goes on?”

“This is the dope factory and Eddie wants to make a bonfire of it.”

“Great work.”

“Keep out of sight and don’t leave your position or we may have a job to find you.”

“Okay.” Ginger retired to cover and Biggles turned back to the others.

He saw they had been busy. On the bench had been piled a considerable amount of material; in fact, everything that could be found of an inflammable nature. Bertie was in the act of upturning a sack of opium on the heap. “That should help to make a good old fug,” he observed, cheerfully.

Eddie poured on it the contents of three bottles. “All set?” he called to Biggles.

“Yes. Buck up.”

From his pocket Eddie produced a petrol lighter. Picking up a loose piece of paper he held it to the flame.

At the precise moment he was about to toss it on the heap what Biggles had feared might happen, happened.

There was a rush of footsteps outside the door. It was flung open. Nicolinos, a pistol in his hand, rushed in. There were other men behind him. Seeing what was happening he came to a dead stop, and thus, for a few seconds, like a film breakdown, everything became static. It leapt back into life with the same suddenness. Nicolinos, raising his gun, came on, with a shout “Stop them.”

“Hold it,” shouted Biggles.

Eddie tossed the burning paper on the bonfire. Blue flame, as the vaporizing spirit caught, spread swiftly.

“Put that fire out some of you,” yelled Nicolinos, snapping a shot at Eddie, who ducked. The shot splintered an empty bottle. Eddie fired back, and

missed.

That started the shooting. Biggles and Bertie fired together. Nicolinos dropped his gun but kept on his feet. His supporters fired too, but were at the disadvantage of being in a bunch. Apart from that the fire, now making a good deal of smoke, must have distracted their attention since they had been ordered to put it out. As no one had been detailed by name to do this they all tried to reach it, and this led to confusion.

“This way, Eddie,” shouted Biggles, still at the window.

Bertie and Eddie began to retire on him. By this time the fire had really got hold and was filling the place with sickly, pungent, yellow smoke, so that it was not easy to see what was happening. Some of the men reaching the source of it tried to beat it out, but scattering the stuff did more harm than good. Sporadic shooting continued.

“Get out. We’ll follow,” Eddie shouted to Biggles.

At this juncture a bullet splashed lead along the stone wall by Biggles’ face, causing him to fall off the chair. “Keep off that chair,” he warned, getting up. “It’s too exposed. We’d do better to make for the door. Keep close.” He set off, keeping near the wall.

There was a crash of a chair going over and Nicolinos loomed up through the murk. Close behind him was Alfondez’ brother. Then an extraordinary thing happened. Before anyone else could shoot, the Egyptian shot Nicolinos in the back. It was deliberate and they all saw it happen. There was another shot and the murderer crumpled. Whether this was intended, or happened to be a random bullet, was not clear. Biggles saw no one. “Keep going,” he said.

By now the smoke was so dense that everyone was coughing. The lights, which had not been switched off, were no more than an orange glow that only made things more confusing. The heat was becoming intense.

Biggles continued to grope his way towards the door as quickly as possible, regardless of the risk of being shot, for with the suffocating smoke filling everyone’s lungs there was a strong possibility of them all being choked by smoke from a fire of their own making.

Not without difficulty he managed to find the door, more than somewhat relieved to find it open. He had feared one of Nicolinos’ men might have shut it and locked them in. As he blundered out into the passage two men who had been standing there ran off, to disappear in the murk, for there was plenty of smoke even there. He sent a shot after them to speed them on their way.

Bertie and Eddie staggered out, coughing, and with tears running down their faces leaned against the wall to recover.

“By thunder! You certainly started something,” Biggles told Eddie, cogently. “Let’s keep going.”

Someone in the chapel started shouting, possibly for help.

“Sounds like somebody can’t find the door,” observed Eddie. “As far as I’m concerned he can take his luck. I’m not going back in there; it took me all my time to get out. We didn’t invite ‘em in. If they choke with an overdose of

their own dope that's okay by me. They've been handing it out to other people long enough."

"I'm inclined to think you're right," replied Biggles. "There's nothing we can do, anyhow. Let's get out."

With his gun still at the ready he started walking quickly down the passage, making for the main entrance. After a quick reconnaissance at the corner, where a few more steps would take them past Nicolinos' room, seeing nobody he went on. The door of the room, when they reached it, stood wide open. The light was on. There was nobody inside. On the writing table lay some papers with which Nicolinos had apparently been dealing when he was interrupted. Also, under a paperweight, were some banknotes, French francs and Greek drachmas, which he may have been in the act of counting.

Biggles grabbed the papers, rolled them into a bundle and stuffed them in his pocket. "There may be something here that could be used as evidence," he said crisply. "Some of these, as we haven't any Greek money on us, may come in useful, too. Dirty money is better than none," he added, grinning, as he helped himself to a few of the drachma notes that lay on top. "That's enough."

As he turned to leave it could be seen there was a trickle of blood on the side of his face.

"Here, I say old boy, are you hurt?" asked Bertie, anxiously.

"No. A chip of stone, or something, from that shot which hit the wall when I was on the chair, caught me, that's all. It stung a bit and knocked me off. Come on. We're not out of the wood yet."

They went on to the exit. There was not a soul in sight. After the commotion inside the trance-like calm of the moonlit courtyard came almost as a shock. Still without seeing anyone they went out into the open, and skirting the wall hurried on to Ginger's position.

A soft whistle brought him out, saucer-eyed. "What the deuce—" he began.

Biggles cut him short. "We'd better get out of sight before we start nattering," he said, shortly, striding on. "Under those trees will do. Let me get my breath back. It was pretty warm inside there, in every sense of the word."

He went on to the inky shadows cast by the tangle of fig trees to which he had referred and sank down, mopping his face. "Phew! Stiffen the crows!" he went on, as the others sat beside him. "What a scramble!" He looked at Eddie with mock reproach. "I'm beginning to think you're a dangerous fellow to go out with. You've been pining for action. Now you've had a basinful I hope you're happy."

Eddie grinned as he took a cigar from his pocket and bit off the end. "Aren't you?"

"Not entirely."

Eddie looked surprised. "Why not? I'd have said we'd done a good night's work."

"If this place burns out there'll be some questions asked."

"Aw shucks! Forget it. Since when has stone burned?"

"I hope you're right, because if you happen to be wrong you may find you started a bigger fire than you intended."

"Listen, buddy. When a guy shoots at me I shoot back. As long as what's inside burns out I don't care what happens to the rest," declared Eddie, unrepentantly. "There's one lot of caramels that won't reach the States, anyhow."

"I must say they made a jolly good fug, old boy," put in Bertie, cleaning his eyeglass with his handkerchief. "By the way, did you see that murdering rascal shoot Nicolinos in the back?"

"I did," answered Biggles.

"Was it an accident? Did he think—"

"No." Biggles shook his head. "It was deliberate."

"Sure it was," confirmed Eddie. "Did you see the expression on his face? He looked crazy."

"Why would he do a thing like that?" questioned Bertie.

"If you're asking for my opinion I'd say it was for revenge," answered Biggles. "If, as I believe, Alfondez was shot behind those cypresses—"

"Somebody was shot there, that's certain," interposed Ginger.

"How do you know?"

"After you'd gone inside I saw a body being carried away."

"From where?"

"Those cypresses near the gate. Gave me a fright. I thought it might be one of you."

"If that was Alfondez he must have been shot by Nicolinos' orders," resumed Biggles. "His brother would know that and he grabbed his chance to pay off the debt. That's the obvious answer. Alternatively, the brother may have been afraid he'd be next on the list for bumping off if Nicolinos suspected it was he who'd told Alfondez that he'd been put on the spot. That may have been what the argument was about. It continued in Nicolinos' room, but broke off when someone brought the news that Bertie had hopped it. Did you bring any spare clips of cartridges, Ginger?"

"Two."

"Give me one. My gun's empty."

"I'm still waiting to hear what went on in there," complained Ginger, as he passed a clip.

Biggles told him, very briefly.

"And now what?" asked Ginger, at the end. "Isn't it time we were getting back to Marcel? He'll be getting worried."

"He's not the only one," stated Biggles.

"If you're worried about Nicolinos, forget it," said Eddie, grimly. "He's had what was coming to him. That goes for the whole pack. What has happened here is a sight better than trying to do the thing the official way."

That gets you nowhere with these thugs, who know every trick of the law and have the money to employ the best lawyers. You've got to be tough. That was the only way we could deal with our gangsters in the States, and, as you know, we had some bright ones. Shoot first and talk afterwards. That's how. Officially we might get a rap over the knuckles for this, but nobody'd be sorry."

"I wasn't thinking so much of that," returned Biggles. "As far as Nicolinos is concerned I couldn't care less."

CHAPTER XIV

TO FINISH THE JOB

EDDIE looked at Biggles curiously. "What's on your mind, pal?"

"After what's happened here my common sense tells me to put a lot of water between myself and this island, and then forget about it. Whatever you may think, Eddie, if this little frolic ever came before an international court we wouldn't have a leg to stand on."

"If anyone accused us he'd only turn the spotlight on himself, and on what's been going on here."

"Admittedly, and that's our best hope of the thing being hushed up; because, believe you me, if this story got out, the newspapers in the countries that don't like us would twist it into a powerful piece of propaganda."

Said Ginger, "If you feel like that what are we waiting for?"

"Frankly," replied Biggles, smiling curiously, "it occurs to me that having gone so far we might as well go the whole hog and finish the job properly. The stink, if a complaint was lodged against us, would be no worse. Let me put it like this. When the racketeers running those ships learn what has happened up here they'll simply sail away and start somewhere else. That's almost a certainty. I have a feeling that while Nicolinos may have been the big noise here, on this island, there was somebody behind him. If those ships failed to reach their home ports that somebody would have to do some hard thinking about what really happened here."

"Say, brother, now you're talking," declared Eddie, enthusiastically.

Biggles cocked an eye on him. "Haven't you had enough action for one night?"

"Not while there's this sort of work to be done."

Ginger stood up and stared in the direction of the monastery gate, where could now be heard a considerable noise of excited talking. "What's all that about?" he asked.

"People arriving from the village to goof at the fire, I imagine," surmised Biggles. "A fire will always draw a crowd. The smoke would be seen from the village."

"That should suit us fine and dandy," said Eddie. "If everyone down below is coming up, it should leave the way clear for us to go down."

"There's something in that," agreed Biggles. "For a start let's get into a position to check the ships are still in the harbour. If the crews have come up here it should, as you say, suit us fine."

"What is it, exactly, that you have in mind, old boy," Bertie wanted to know.

"Well, it's only a broad idea at the moment, but if by some sort of accident one of those ships caught fire lying so close together they'd both go. That

should put the lid on the whole dirty business for quite some time.”

“We ought to be able to arrange a little accident like that,” said Bertie, brightly.

“You’ve been on the *Saphos*. I take it she’s a wooden ship?”

“She is, and pretty old wood too, old boy. From what I saw of her I’d say she’s coming apart at the seams with dry rot—if you get my meaning.”

“Let’s have a look at things, anyway.” Keeping behind the trees Biggles led the party to a position that brought the main gateway of the monastery, and the road leading to it, under observation. A little crowd had gathered, and more people, including several children, were arriving. All were staring at the building, although as a matter of fact the fire, which was still confined to the chapel, appeared to be dying down, presumably because the fuel available had been consumed. But there was still a good deal of smoke hanging about. A little group of men stood alone, and these Biggles took to be members of the gang. Two wore seaman’s caps and jackets.

Bertie touched Biggles on the arm. “You see the stoutish lad with the whiskers? That’s Stavroulos, skipper of the *Saphos*. I saw him when I was on board.”

Biggles nodded. “Then it looks as if some of the ships’ companies have come up here.” He moved on to a fresh position, one which commanded a view of the harbour. The two ships were still there. Beyond, on the open sea, several small sailing vessels were making for port under full sail.

Biggles frowned, and turned an eye to the moon, across which a wisp of cloud was drifting. “I have an idea why those caïques are making for home so early,” he said, thoughtfully. “It can only mean there’s weather on the way. Living here they know the signs. We shall have to get a move on.”

Making a detour round the cypresses where Alfondez was shot he emerged on the track that led to the village and started walking down it.

“We shall be seen if we keep to the road,” Ginger pointed out.

“There’s no other way,” answered Biggles. “This is no time or place for cross-country work. Actually, with so many people about I don’t think it would matter much if we were seen—anyway, by the local folk. They won’t know who we are.”

They did in fact meet several people, both men, women and children who, from their dress, particularly the men’s baggy trousers, were obviously local Greeks from the village. One or two of them spoke, probably asking questions about the fire, but as no one could speak the language Biggles merely waved a hand and walked on, slowing the pace as they neared the village.

It was a typical Greek village of the poorer sort, comprising a huddle of white, flat-topped houses behind a single street facing the rather ramshackle wharf that formed the waterfront. At the near end of this was a slipway on which had been drawn up several small home-made-looking rowing boats. There were one or two shops along the front, but as they had closed for the night the type of merchandise they sold could not be determined. All lettering

was of course in the native language, with two incongruous exceptions. One was a weather-beaten poster carrying the words "Wild Woodbines" and the other was a tin sign displaying in large letters the single word "Shell". The only bright light came from the window of what was evidently a tavern, and the only people in sight were three men who stood talking at a corner nearby.

The black bulk of the two ships dwarfed everything else. They lay side by side, the larger almost touching the wharf to which it was connected by a gangway. This ship had apparently been there when the *Saphos* had arrived, for the smaller vessel, lying alongside, had taken the outer berth.

After a glance around Biggles walked to the bows of the larger ship and tried to read its name, but the letters were cyphers unknown to him. However, a faded flag hanging limply from the peak told him what he wanted to know. It bore a single star. He rejoined the others who had remained in the shadow of a wooden shed that might have been a boathouse.

"She's an Iron Curtain job," he told them. "Could be Russian, Bulgarian or Rumanian, although if her home port is Odessa, she's probably Russian, as Alfondez said. I saw no sign of a watch on board although there must be one."

"So what do we do about it?" asked Eddie. "We can't set fire to her with a match."

"We may be able to do better than that," returned Biggles. "The one to go for is the *Saphos*. Lying beside the big job as she is, if anything happened to her the other wouldn't be able to move."

"To get to the *Saphos* means crossing the other," said Ginger.

"Not necessarily. We could get out to her by borrowing one of those rowing boats."

"You've got it," agreed Eddie. "What do we do when we get to her."

"Cutting her adrift, if that was possible, which I doubt, would be no use. Fire's the only thing. Look across the street. Can you see what I see?"

Nobody spoke.

"To me," went on Biggles, "the word Shell means petrol. Some of these small craft must have petrol engines. There's hardly likely to be a pump here so the stuff must be sold in cans. A can of petrol would do the job."

"How are you going to get it, laddie, that's the thing?" asked Bertie.

"Buy it, of course. I have some Greek money."

"The shop's shut," Ginger pointed out.

"I'll knock 'em up. There's bound to be somebody there."

"But you can't speak—"

"Leave it to me," cut in Biggles. "Wait here. Keep out of sight."

With that, without making any attempt at concealment, he walked boldly across to the shops and then along to the one bearing the sign in which he was interested. A dim light showed at a window. He knocked.

The door was opened and a boy of about twelve appeared on the threshold to gaze enquiringly at the face of the visitor.

"Petrol?" said Biggles.

The boy shook his head as if he did not understand.

“*Essence?*” said Biggles, trying French.

Again the boy shook his head.

Biggles took him by the arm, led him outside and pointed to the Shell sign.

That did it. The boy smiled broadly and nodded. Leaving Biggles standing there he went down a lane, apparently to the rear of the shop, to reappear after a few anxious minutes carrying an old-fashioned two-gallon can. Biggles took it, set it down and held out some Greek notes. The boy took two of them and nodded, still smiling. With the can in his hand Biggles walked back to the others.

“Here’s the petrol,” he said.

“That boy’s still watching,” observed Ginger.

“Mere curiosity,” returned Biggles. “Nice kid. He probably thinks I’m just a crazy foreigner.”

“He wouldn’t be far wrong, at that, I guess,” said Eddie, jokingly.

“Let’s get cracking,” advised Biggles. “The people will be coming back from the fire, presently. There’s no need for everyone to go to the *Saphos*. You’ve been on her before, Bertie, so you’d better be one. Eddie, would you like to row him out? That should be enough.”

“Okay.”

“Good. Then get on with it. We’ll wait here.”

Bertie picked up the can, and with Eddie walked to the slipway.

Biggles and Ginger, watching, saw them pick up a small boat and put it on the water. Eddie fetched oars from another boat and a minute later was paddling quietly towards the objective. There was not far to go for the harbour itself was tiny. A matter of perhaps fifty yards. Another two or three minutes and the little craft disappeared behind the black shape of the *Saphos*.

Ginger looked at the street. The three men who had been talking had gone, but two more came out of the tavern and walked towards the nearer vessel. They crossed the gangplank and disappeared.

“Phew,” breathed Biggles. “This is nervy work. I’m afraid I’m getting a bit old for this commando drill. I hope you realize that this is sabotage in a big way. If we’re caught at it—”

“I think like Eddie,” broke in Ginger. “We’ve fought against chaps who probably never did anyone any harm, so I see no reason to jib at having a crack at these swine, who are a menace to—”

Biggles caught him by the arm. “By thunder! They’ve done it,” he exclaimed, as a smudge of smoke coiled up from the *Saphos* amidships.

A few seconds later the saboteurs reappeared, Eddie driving the little boat through the water with furious strength. From one of the ships, it was not possible to tell which, came a shout.

“Stand by in case they need help,” snapped Biggles. “If there’s going to be trouble this is where it’ll start.”

“Listen!” said Ginger tersely. “Instead of climbing back over the hill where

we're likely to meet people what's wrong with getting in the boat and going round to the Otter by sea?"

"Nothing that I can see," declared Biggles. "Sound idea. We'll try it. We could get nearer that way, anyhow. Come on."

He ran to the slipway and reached it at the same time as the boat. "Don't get out," he said. "We're coming in. We'll try getting back to Marcel by water. It should be safer than going overland. Will the boat hold us?"

"Just about," said Bertie.

By the time Biggles and Ginger had stowed themselves in there was not much freeboard, but with the water dead calm there was enough.

"Okay, Eddie," said Biggles. "Get round that headland and out of the harbour as fast as you can—but don't swamp us."

There was now a good deal of noise coming from the ships where the smoke was reflecting a ruddy glow from below. There were also shouts of alarm from the shore.

"Let the blighters shout," said Bertie. "It'll take more than shouts to put out a couple of gallons of you know what."

"Did anyone see you?"

"No. I didn't see anybody. I dumped the stuff in the cabin where they locked me up. Laid a trail in the corridor. Even so I lost my front hair, confound it, when I set her alight. Oh here, I say, what's this coming?"

There was no doubt about what it was. They had reached the harbour entrance just in time to meet several caïques coming in.

"Take no notice, Eddie," rapped out Biggles. "Keep going. If we stop we've had it."

Eddie ploughed on. There were hails from one or two of the little ships, busy dropping their sails. Biggles made some incoherent noises in return and this must have satisfied the callers, for no attempt was made to stop the rowing boat.

"They're too interested in what's happening to the *Saphos* to take much notice of us," said Biggles. "They'll remember us later, no doubt, but by that time, with any luck, we should be away."

The boat rocked a little as it met the open sea but the slight swell was nothing serious.

"We'll keep close inshore in case they come after us and we have to run for it," decided Biggles, as they rounded the headland which cut off their view of the harbour.

The last picture Ginger had of the *Saphos* she was blazing furiously, with the reflection lighting up the hill.

"The kids here should remember tonight," remarked Bertie, cheerfully. "They must think the ghost of old Guy Fawkes has got loose. First a fire on the hill, now one in the harbour—yes, by Jove! what fun they must be having."

"We shan't think it's so funny if we fail to make the Otter before the storm

hits us.”

“What storm?” asked Ginger.

“Look at the moon.”

Ginger looked. More and more clouds were racing across the sky.

“Say when you’ve had enough, Eddie, and someone else can take over,” said Biggles.

“I’m good for a long time yet,” Eddie assured him.

CHAPTER XV

THE FINAL EFFORT

A RIPPLE, as yet no more than a cat's-paw, ruffled the surface of the classic sea.

"Here it comes," said Biggles. "And it won't be long a' coming, if I know anything. It's these sudden storms, which have a different name according to where you happen to be, that make the Mediterranean so treacherous. The ancients knew all about 'em. They kept close to land. We'd better do the same. Pull closer in, Eddie. Following the coast may mean a bit farther to go but it would be safer if we should have to swim for it."

"How far have we to go?" asked Ginger, anxiously.

"For a rough guess, something like two or three miles."

Eddie, who was of course facing astern, said something carrying a light had just come out of the harbour. "It may be after us. From the rate the light is moving, the boat or whatever it is must have a motor." While speaking he had been pulling hard towards the black mass of the rocky coast. When within a hundred yards he began to row parallel with it.

Even from that position they could still see the reflection of the fire in the harbour catching the top of the hill behind it. Ginger remarked that he thought it was getting brighter.

A few minutes later the light from the sky, which had become intermittent, was cut off completely by a great bank of cloud.

"That's not going to make things any easier," said Biggles.

"The water's nice and warm, old boy," remarked Bertie, trailing his hand in it.

The slight swell which had been noticeable now became more pronounced, and presently the overloaded boat shipped a little water over her bows as she stuck her nose into a wave.

Said Biggles, "It's no use. Let's get ashore. We can't be all that distance away from the machine. It would be advisable anyway, if that motor-boat was following us. It won't dare to come close in, in the dark, for fear of bumping into something solid."

The wisdom of this suggestion was made evident when a wave struck the boat broadside on and nearly capsized it. Ginger started baling with his hands and Eddie grunted as he put his weight behind the oars.

Biggles was peering into the gloom trying to see the shore when it happened. With a jar the bows struck what must have been a submerged rock. The boat overturned, and in a moment they were all in the water, swimming.

"Try to keep together," called Biggles.

Fortunately, as a result of Biggles' precaution, they hadn't far to go. The outline of the iron-bound coast hardened, towering above them, but a nasty

backwash made landing difficult. Bertie, who was a strong swimmer, was first out, and called continuously until the others joined him. He gave Ginger a hand and hauled him out.

“Are we all here?” asked Biggles, wringing water from his hair.

“All present and correct,” reported Bertie.

“That’s something, anyway,” rejoined Biggles. “If we can get a bit higher maybe we’ll be able to see where we are.”

They clambered a little way up what turned out to be a steep slope that went straight down into the water without a beach. Even this was difficult, not to say dangerous, for there were cracks and holes between the boulders which could not be seen for the jungle of shrubs that flourished wherever they could gain a foothold.

“From the sea it didn’t look as rough as this,” remarked Eddie.

“It never does,” answered Biggles, finding a seat on a ledge of rock. “We shall make nothing of it while it’s as dark as this. If we try it one of us is going to break his neck. We shall have to wait for daylight so we might as well make ourselves comfortable.”

They found a reasonably level place and sat down to wait for dawn. The rocks, giving up the heat they had absorbed during the day, were still warm.

“These coasts are all alike,” remarked Biggles. “They look all right from a distance. It isn’t until you get on ‘em that you realize what they’re really like—socking great boulders and herbage as tough as wire—barbed wire, too, some of it.”

“My cigars are pulp,” complained Eddie.

“Maybe that’s a good thing,” returned Biggles. “If you dropped a lighted match on this stuff we’re sitting on you might set the whole island on fire. It happens constantly. You must have read in the papers about the frightful fires they have along the French Riviera, and less often in Italy and Spain.”

To Ginger the night seemed interminable. They saw no more of the motor-boat. Biggles was of the opinion that it had put back into the harbour to escape the storm.

Dawn broke at last, to reveal a dull-red, cloud-riven sky over a grey, storm-tossed sea. There was not a vessel of any sort in sight.

“Those *caïques* knew what they were doing last night when they made for the harbour,” said Biggles, as he got up and stretched himself. “Let’s go.” He started picking his way across the shoulder of the slope, climbing diagonally.

It did not take them long to realize how impossible the climb would have been in the dark. Progress was difficult enough in daylight. There was no question of travelling in anything like a straight line. Movement could only be made by weaving about between the huge boulders and forcing a passage through the shrubby lavender, rosemary and arbutus, that filled the air with their aromatic fragrance. However, after a stiff climb of about three hundred feet they struck a goat track, much overgrown but just discernible, and after that they made faster time.

The sun was well up when, reaching the sky line at the top of the shoulder they saw below them the creek, and, on the sheltered water, the Otter riding where they had left it. Marcel could also be seen, standing on the hull, gazing at the hillside.

“Look!” exclaimed Biggles, pointing. “We shall have to move fast or we may be too late.”

Fighting its way along the coast was a black, rakish-looking craft about the size of a pinnacle. It carried no sail, but a foaming wash at the stern showed that it was under power.

The descent of the hill became a race, a mad obstacle race, in which risks were taken that normally would have been considered foolish. Jumping, sliding and grabbing at shrubs or the branches of olives to steady themselves, they tore on. Once Biggles let out a hail. Marcel heard it. He saw them and waved.

Scratched, bruised, dishevelled and panting, they reached the ancient “stables” where the Otter was moored. There was no time for explanations. All Biggles said to Marcel was: “They’re after us, in a boat coming along the coast. Start up.”

Marcel dived into the cockpit.

“Is there room in here for us to get off?” cried Ginger.

“There’ll have to be,” returned Biggles, grimly. “She’d break up in the sea that’s running outside.” He joined Marcel in the cockpit.

The others scrambled into the cabin. Ginger cast off. The door was closed. “Okay,” he yelled.

The engines came to life.

For two or three minutes the aircraft did not move as Biggles gave the engines time to warm up. Then he taxied slowly to the inner end of the creek for the longest run possible and turned to face the sea.

“You won’t be dead into the wind,” Marcel pointed out, looking worried.

“There isn’t enough in here to matter.”

“Will she do it?”

“I don’t know. We shall only find out by trying. That won’t take long. Here comes the boat. They must have known where we were. Hold your breath.”

The engines roared. The Otter surged forward, swiftly gathering speed. There was only one way out, and that was straight over the boat. The steep sloping sides of the creek ruled out any question of turning.

The Otter ‘unstuck’ as Biggles jerked her off. For a few seconds, until it seemed that collision with the boat was inevitable, he held her down. Only at the last instant did he pull the stick back to send the aircraft shooting up in a wild zoom. Then, in an instant, the danger was past, with the machine in a steep bank sweeping over the open sea.

Biggles looked at Marcel’s face, pale under its tan, and grinned. “I can now give you your answer,” he said. “She did it. Frankly, I thought she would. That’s the advantage of knowing the precise performance of one’s aircraft.”

Marcel moistened his lips, smiling weakly, and settled back in his seat. "I can't stand these shocks any more," he murmured sadly. "When I was young and crazy, yes. Now, *hélas*, my heart stops. Where do we go?"

"Malta, for petrol, I think is our best bet. You might ask Bertie to give me a course and the approximate distance."

Presently Bertie brought the information. "You've got a headwind, old boy," he remarked.

Looking serious Biggles glanced at the petrol gauge. "Okay," he said briefly.

"Going to carry on?"

"We shan't get petrol anywhere nearer without letting people know we've been operating in this area. I'd rather not do that."

An hour passed. Two hours. Biggles' eyes went more and more often to the petrol gauge. "I doubt if we shall quite do it," he said at last. "There is this about it. We're out of the storm area so we have calm water under us if we have to go down."

A few minutes later a formation of three jets, flying high, roared past, leaving their trails behind them.

"I wonder where they've come from," said Biggles, casually, without any real interest. He maintained his course.

Half an hour later a big ship came up over the horizon a little on the starboard bow.

"*Porte-avions*," murmured Marcel.

"It's an aircraft carrier all right," agreed Biggles. "I wonder who she belongs to? Let's have a look." He altered course a trifle.

Bertie was the first to identify the carrier. "It's one of ours, the *Ark Royal*," he announced. "I'd know her anywhere."

A strange smile crept over Biggles' face. "Make a signal to her and ask if she could spare us a drop of petrol."

Bertie went aft. He came back laughing. "You can have some petrol but they're not having you land on deck."

"Afraid I'll make a mucker of it and set 'em on fire," conjectured Biggles. "All right. Tell 'em I'll touch down alongside."

To Ginger the rest bordered on fantasy. Biggles put the Otter down almost directly in front of the huge ship, which, with stately majesty, crept up to the aircraft. Whistles blew. Bluejackets ran. The arm of a crane swung cans of petrol over the side—all this with drill-like precision. With the cans came a chief petty officer. "Sorry sir, but I shall have to ask you to sign for this," he said, unsmilingly.

Biggles signed the paper.

"If you'll fill up I'll take the cans back," said the sailor, who appeared to see nothing remarkable in an operation which must have been unusual, even for him.

The petrol was poured into the Otter's main-tank. The empty cans were

reloaded. The petty officer took his place on them. He waved a signal to the operator and was swung back to his own ship.

"Much obliged," shouted Biggles.

"Get clear or we may swamp you," called an officer.

Biggles started his engines, which had been cut for the operation, and moved off to a safe distance.

On the big ship a bell rang. Water churned, and the carrier, a picture of tremendous power, resumed its interrupted journey.

"Nice work," murmured Eddie.

"*Magnifique*," said Marcel, in an awed voice.

Biggles chuckled. "After all, that's what the navy's for." He took the Otter off. "There's no need now for us to go to Malta," he told Marcel. "We'll make straight for Corsica, which will save us a lot of time. As we go I'll tell you what happened on the island, then you'll understand why I wanted to get away from it in a hurry."

The Otter reached Corsica shortly after noon, and having been refuelled at Marcel's request, went on to Marseilles, touching down at Marignane marine airport the same evening.

"I think a bath and a square meal are indicated," said Biggles, wearily. "What's everyone going to do after that?"

Marcel said he'd fly his own machine to Paris, where he had a little business at the Laughing Horse. Eddie, anxious to get back home to report, decided to stay with the Otter as far as London and from there cross the Atlantic by one of the regular services.

So it fell out. The night was spent at the airport. Morning saw them on their way.

Arriving in England, goodbye was said to Eddie, who managed to get a seat on the first plane leaving London Airport for the United States, Biggles, Bertie and Ginger going on by car to the office at Scotland Yard.

"I'd better go and let the chief know we're home," said Biggles on arrival.

Air Commodore Raymond looked up from his desk when he entered. "So you've managed to find your way home!" he greeted.

"Yes, sir."

"What have you been doing?"

"As a combined operation it was most instructive. On the whole we had quite an interesting trip, and a profitable one, I hope; but if I were you, sir, I wouldn't ask too many questions," was the reply Biggles made.

"Why not?"

"Because if you don't know anything, you would, without telling lies, be able to plead ignorance of certain matters that may reach your ears."

"I see," returned the Air Commodore slowly, looking at Biggles suspiciously. "So it was like that?"

"Just like that, sir," said Biggles, evenly.

"You'd better tell me this. Did you catch up with the dope runners?"

Biggles took a cigarette and tapped it on the back of his hand. "We did, sir, and without going into details I think I can say that the action we took should discourage them from further activities for quite a long while."

The Air Commodore smiled. "One of these days you're going to get me into trouble."

"One of these days, sir, it's more likely that I shall get myself into trouble," returned Biggles, smiling wanly as he walked to the door and went out.

THE END